

A Son of Courage

Archie P. McKishnie

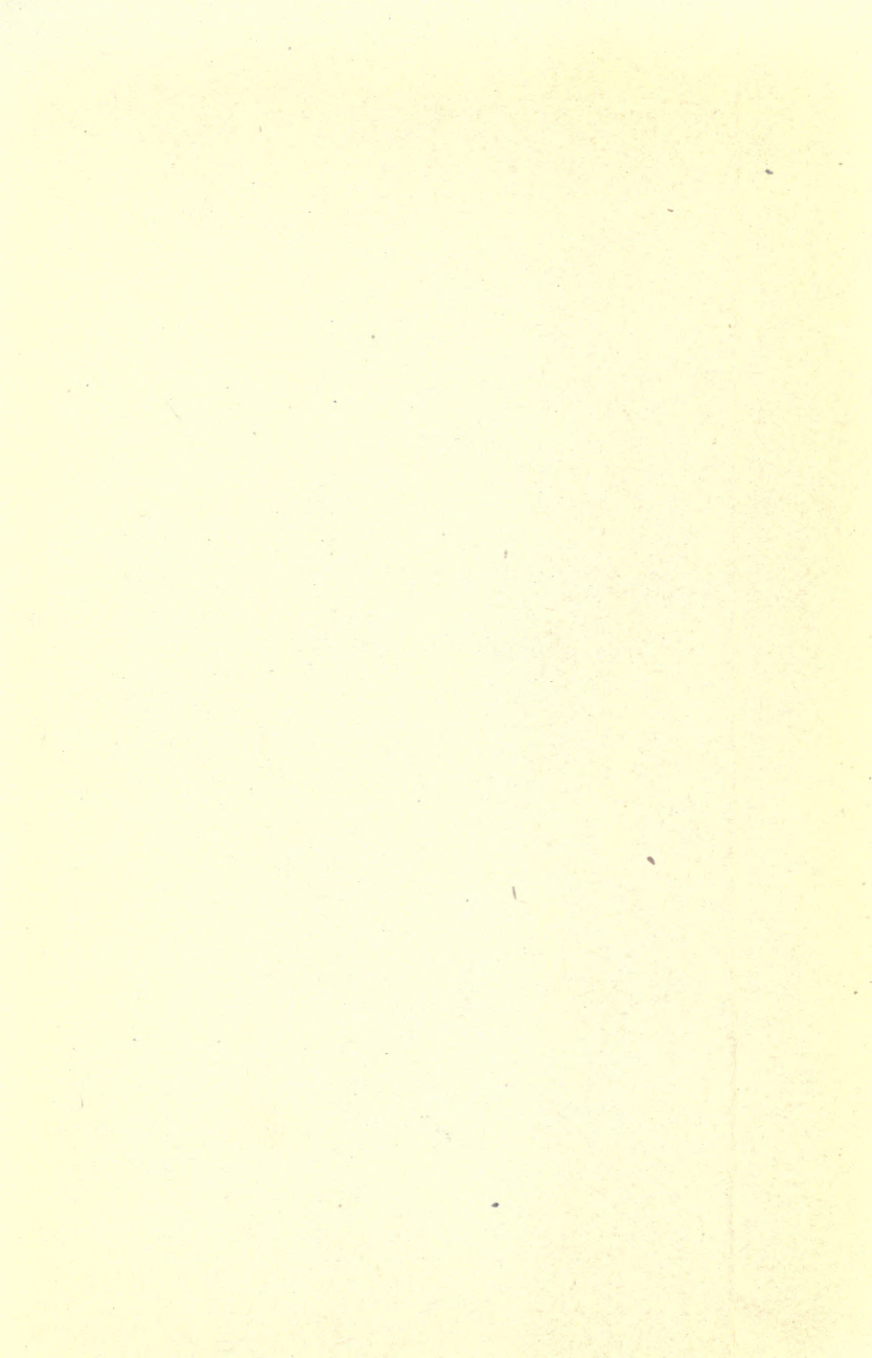
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A Son of Courage







"Oh, 'aren't they lovely!" cried Erie.

A Son *of* Courage

By
Archie P. McKishnie

*Author of Love of the Wild,
Willow, the Wisp, etc.*



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A Son of Courage

*To my sister,
Jean Blewitt, who knew and
loved its characters this book
is lovingly dedicated.
The Author.*

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A SON OF COURAGE

CHAPTER I

BILLY WILSON'S STRATEGY

Mrs. Wilson lit the coal-oil lamp and placed it in the center of the kitchen table; then she turned toward the door, her head half bent in a listening attitude.

A brown water-spaniel waddled from the woodshed into the room, four bright-eyed puppies at her heels, and stood half in the glow, half in the shadow, short tail ingratiatingly awag.

"Scoot you!" commanded the woman, and with a wild scurry mother dog and puppies turned and fled to the friendly darkness of their retreat.

Mrs. Wilson stood with frowning gaze fastened on the door. She was a tall, angular woman of some forty years, heavy of features, as she was when occasion demanded it, heavy of hand. Tiny fret-lines marred a face which under less trying conditions of life might have been winsome, but tonight the lips of the generous mouth were tightly compressed and the rise and fall of the bosom beneath the low cut flannel gown hinted of a volcano that would ere long erupt to the confusion of somebody.

As a quick step sounded outside, she lowered herself slowly to a high-backed chair and waited, hands locked closely upon her lap.

The door opened and her husband entered. He cast a quick, apprehensive glance at his wife, and the low whistle died on his lips as he passed over to the long roller towel hanging above the wash-bench and proceeded to dry his hands.

He was a medium sized man, with brown wavy hair and a beard which failed to conceal the glad boyishness of a face that would never quite be old. The eyes he turned upon the woman when she sharply spoke his name were blue and tranquil.

"Yes, Mary?" he responded gently.

"I want'a tell you that I'm tired of bein' the slave of you an' your son," she burst out. "One of these days I'll be packin' up and goin' to my home folks in Nova Scotia."

Wilson averted his face and proceeded to straighten the towel on the roller. His action seemed to infuriate the woman.

Her lips tightened. Her hands unclenched and gripped the table as she slowly arose.

"You —" she commenced, her voice tense with passion, "you —" she checked herself. Unconsciously one of the groping hands had come in contact with the soft leather cover of a book which lay on the table.

It was the family Bible. She had placed it there after reading her son Anson his evening chapter. Slowly she mastered herself and sank back into her chair.

Wilson came over and laid a work-hardened hand gently on her heaving shoulder.

"Mary," he said, "what is it? What have I done?"

"Oh," she cried miserably, "what haven't you done, Tom Wilson? Didn't you bring me here to this lonesome spot when I was happy with my son, happy an' contented?"

"But I told you you'd like find it some lonesome, Mary, you remember?"

"Yes, but did you so much as hint at what awful things I'd have to live through here? Not you! Did you tell

me that an old miser 'ud die and his ghost ha'nt this neighborhood? Did you tell me that blindness 'ud strike one of the best and most useful young men low? Did you tell me," she ran wildly on, "that the sweetest girl in the world 'ud be dyin' of a heartbreak? Did you tell me anythin', Tom Wilson, that a woman who was leavin' her own home folks, to work for you and your son, should a' been told?"

Wilson sighed. "How was I to know these things would happen, Mary? It's been hard haulin', I know, but someday it won't be so hard. Maybe now, you'd find it easier if you didn't shoulder everybody else's trouble, like you do —"

"Shut right up!" she flared, "I'm a Christian woman, Tom Wilson. Do you think I could face God on my knees if I failed in my duty to the sick as calls fer me? Why, I couldn't sleep if I didn't do what little I'm able to do fer them in trial; I'd hear weak voices acallin' me, I'd see pain-wild eyes watchin' fer me to come an' help their first-born into the world."

"But, Mary, there's a doctor at Bridgetown now and —"

"Doctors!" she cried scornfully. "Little enough they know the needs of a woman at such a time. A doctor may be all right in his place, but his place ain't here among us woods folk. I tell you now I know my duty an' I'll do it because they need me."

"We all need you, Mary," spoke her husband quickly. "Didn't I tell you that when I persuaded you to come? I need you; Billy needs you."

She looked up at him, tears filming the fire of anger in her eyes.

"No," she said in low tense tones, "your son don't

need me. I'm nuthin' to him. Sometimes I think—I think he cares—'cause I'm longin' fer it, I guess. But somehow he seems to be lookin' beyond me to *someone else*."

Wilson sighed and sank into a chair.

"I guess maybe it's your fancy playin' pranks on you, Mary," he suggested hesitatingly. "Two years of livin' in this lonesome spot has kinder got on your nerves."

"Nerves!" she cried indignantly, sitting bolt upright. "Don't you 'er anybody else dare accuse me of havin' nerves, Tom Wilson. If I wasn't the most sensible-minded person alive I'd be throwin' fits er goin' off into gallopin' hysterics every hour, with the things that Willium does to scare the life out of a body."

"What's Billy been doin' now?" asked Wilson anxiously.

She shivered. "Nothin' out'a the ordinary. What's that limb allars doin' to scare the daylight clean outa me an' the *neighbors*? If you'd spend a little more of your spare time in the house with your wife an' less in the barn with your precious stock you wouldn't need to be askin' what he's been adoin'. But I'll tell you what he did only this evenin' afore you come home from changin' words with Cobin Keeler.

"Missus Scraff—you know what a fidgety fly-off-the-handle she is, an' how she suffers from the asthma—well, she'd come over an' was stayin' to supper. I sent that Willium out on the back ridge to gather some wild thimble-berries fer dessert. He comes in just as I had the table all set, that wicked old coon he's made a pet of at his heels an' that devil-eyed crow, Croaker, on his shoulder. Afore I could get hold of the broom, he put the covered pail on the table an' went out ag'in. The coon follered

him, but that crow jumped right onto the table an' grabbed a piece of cake. I made a dash at him an' he flopped to Missus Scraff's shoulder. She was chewin' a piece of slippery-ellum bark fer her asthma, an' when his claws gripped her shoulder she shrieked an' like to 'a' choked to death on it.

"It took me all of half an hour to get her quieted, an' then I made to show her what nice berries we got from our back ridge. 'Jest hold your apron, Mrs. Scraff, an' I'll give you a glimpse of what we're goin' to top our supper off with,' I says, strivin' to get the poor soul's mind off herself.

"She held out her apron, an' I lefled the lid off the pail and pours what's in it into her lap.

"An' what d'ye 'spose was in that pail, Tom Wilson? Four garter snakes and a lizard; that's what your precious son had gone out and gathered fer our dessert. I spilled the whole caboodle of 'em into her apron afore I noticed, an' she give one screech an' fainted dead away. While I was busy bringin' her around, that Willium sneaked in an' gathered them squirmen' reptiles off the floor. I couldn' do more jest then than look him a promise to settle with him later, 'cause I had my hands full as it was. I found a pail of berries on the table when I got a chance to look about me, an' I ain't sayin' but that boy got them pails mixed, but that don't excuse him none."

Wilson, striving to keep his face grave, nodded. "That's how it's been, I guess, Mary. He kin no more help pickin' up every snake and animal he comes across then he kin help breathin'. But he don't mean any harm, Billy don't."

"That's neither here ner there," she snapped. "He doesn't seem to care what harm he does. An' the hard part of it is," she burst out, "I can't take no pleasure in

whalin' him same as I might if I was his real mother; I jest can't, that's all. He has a way of lookin' at me out'a them big, grey eyes of his'n — "

The voice choked up and a tear splashed down on the hand clenched on her lap.

Comfortingly her husband's hand covered it from sight, as though he sought to achieve by this small token of understanding that which he could not hope to achieve by mere words.

She caught her breath quickly and a flush stole up beneath the sun and wind stain on her cheeks. There was that in the pressure of the hand on hers, strong yet tender, which swept the feeling of loneliness from her heart.

" Mary," said the man, " I guess neither of us understand Billy and maybe we never will, quite. I've often tried to tell you how much your willin'ness to face this life here meant to him and me but I'm no good at that sort'a thing. I just hoped you'd understan', that's all."

" Well, I'm goin' to do my duty by you both, allars," Mrs. Wilson spoke in matter-of-fact tones, as she reached for her sewing-basket. " When I feel you need checkin' up, Tom Wilson, checked you're goin' to be, an' when Willium needs a hidin' he's goin' to get a hidin'. An," she added, as her husband got up from his chair, saying something about having to turn the horses out to pasture, " you needn't try to side-track me from my duty neither."

" All right, Mary," he agreed, his hand on the door-latch.

" An' if you're agoin' out to the barn do try'nd not carry any more of the barn-yard in on your big feet than you kin help. I jest finished moppin' the floors."

Wilson stepped out into the spicy summer darkness and went slowly down the path to the barn. As far as eye

could reach, through the partially cleared forest, tiny clearing fires glowed up through the darkness, seeming to vie with big low hanging stars. The pungent smoke of burning log and sward mingled pleasantly with the scent of fern and wild blossoms.

Wilson lit his pipe and with arms folded on the top rail of the barnyard fence gazed down across the partially-cleared, fire-dotted sweep to where, a mile distant, a long, densely timbered point of land stood darkly silhouetted against the sheen of a rising moon.

From the bay-waters came the lonely cry of a loon, from the marshes the booming of night-basking bullfrogs. The hoot of the owl sounded faintly from the forest beyond; the yap of a foraging fox drifted through the night's stillness from the uplands.

A long time Wilson stood pondering. When at length he bestirred himself a full moon swam above a transfigured world. A silvery sheen swept softly the open spaces; through the trees the white bay-waters shimmered; the clearing fires had receded to mere sparks with silvery smoke trails stretching straight up towards a starred infinity.

He sighed and turned to glance back at the cottage resting in the hardwood grove. It looked very homey, very restful to him, beneath its vines of clustering wild-grape and honeysuckle. It was home — home it must be always. And Mary loved it just as he loved it; this he knew. She was a fine woman, a great helpmate, a wonderful wife and mother. She was fair minded too. She loved Billy quite as much as she loved her own son, Anson. Billy must be more careful, more thoughtful of her comfort. He would have a heart to heart talk with his son, he told himself as he went on to the barn.

He completed his chores and went thoughtfully back up the flower-edged path to the house. "There's one good thing about Mary's crossness," he reflected, "it don't last long. She'll be her old cheerful self ag'in by now."

But Mrs. Wilson was not her old cheerful self; far from it. Wilson realized this fact as soon as he opened the door. She raised stern eyes to her husband as he entered.

"You see them?" she asked with sinister calmness, pointing to a patched and clay-stained pair of trousers on the floor beside her chair. "Them's Willium's. He's jest gone to bed an' I ordered him to throw 'em down to be patched."

Wilson nodded, "Yes, Mary?"

"And do you see this here object that I'm holdin' up afore your dotin' father's eyes?"

He came forward and took the object from her hand.

"It also belongs to your dear, gentle son," she grated, "leastwise I found it in one of his pants pockets."

Wilson whistled softly. "You don't say!" he managed to articulate. "Why, Mary, it's a pipe!"

"Is it?"

"Yes, a corn-cob pipe," he repeated weakly.

"Is it re'lly?" she returned with sarcasm. "I wasn't sure. I thort maybe it was a fish-line, or a jack-knife. Now what do you think of your precious son?" she demanded.

Wilson shook his head. "It's a new pipe," he ventured to say, "and," sniffing the bowl, "it ain't had nuthin' more deadly than dried mullen leaves in it so far. Ain't a great deal of harm in a boy smokin' mullen leaves, shorely, Mary."

"Oh, is that so? Haven't I heered you an' Cobin Keeler say, time and ag'in, that that's how you both got the

smoke-habit? And look at you old chimbnays now; the pipe's never out'a your mouths."

"I'll talk things over with Billy in the mornin'," promised Wilson as he took the boot-jack from its peg.

"A pile of good your talkin' 'll do," she cried. "I'm goin' to talk things over with that boy with a hickory ram-rod, jest as soon as I feel he's proper asleep; that's what I'm goin' to do! Who's trainin' that boy, you er me?" she demanded.

"You, of course, Mary."

"Well then, you best let me be. What I feel he should get, he's goin' to get, and get right. You keep out'a this, Tom Wilson, if you want me to keep on; that's all."

"It don't seem right to wake boys up just to give 'em a whalin', Mary," he protested. "My Ma used to wake me up sometimes, but never to whale me. I'd rather remember —"

"Shut up! I tell you, I'm goin' to give him the hickory this night or I'm goin' to know the reason why. I'll break that boy of his bad habits er I'll break my arm tryin'. You let me be!"

"I'm not findin' fault with your methods of trainin' boys, Mary," her husband hastened to say. "You're doin' your best by Billy, I know that right well. And Billy is rather a tough stick of first-growth timber to whittle smooth and straight, I know that, too. But the gnarliest hickory makes the best axe-handle, so maybe he'll make a good man some day, with your help."

"Humph! well that bein' so, I'm goin' to help him see the error of his ways this night if ever I did," she promised grimly.

Something like a muffled chuckle came from behind the stairway door, but the good woman, intent on her grievance,

did not hear it. Wilson heard, however, and let the boot-jack fall to the floor with a clatter. He picked it up and carried it over to its accustomed peg on the wall, whistling softly the tune which he had whistled to Billy in the old romping, astride-neck days:

Oh, you'd better be up, and away, lad.
You better be up and away!
There is danger here in the glade, lad,
It's a heap of trouble you've made, lad —
So you'd better be up and away!

Over beside the table, Mrs. Wilson watched him from somber eyes.

"That's right!" she sighed. "Whistle! It shows all you care. That boy could do anythin' he wanted to do an' you wouldn't say a word; no, not a word!"

Wilson did not answer. He was listening for the stairs to creak, telling him that Billy had left his eaves-dropping for the security of the loft.

Billy had heard and understood. When his dad sent him one of those "up and away" signals he never questioned its significance. He didn't like listening in secret, but surely he reasoned, a boy had a right to know just what was coming to him. And he knew what was coming to him, all right — a caning from the supple hickory ram-rod — *maybe!*

Up in the roomy loft which he and his step-brother, Anson, shared together, he lit the lamp. Anson was sleeping and Billy wondered just what he would say when he woke up in the morning and found his pants gone. Their mother had demanded that a pair of pants be thrown down to her. Billy needed his own so he had thrown down Anson's.

But how in the world was he ever going to get out of

that window with Anson's bed right up against it, and Anson sleeping in the bed? Anson would be sure to hear the ladder when Walter Watland and Maurice Keeler raised it against the wall. He must get Anson up and out of that bed!

Billy placed the lamp on a chair and reaching over shook Anson's long, regular snore into fragments of little gasps. He shook harder and Anson sat up, sandy hair rumpled and pale blue eyes blinking in the light.

"What's amatter?" he asked sleepily.

"Hush," cautioned Billy. "Ma's downstairs wide awake and she's awful cross. What you been doin' to rile her, Anse?"

Anson frowned and scratched his head. "Did you tell her 'bout my lettin' the pigs get in the garden when I was tendin' gap this afternoon?" he asked suspiciously.

"No, it ain't that. I guess maybe she's worried more'n cross, an' she's scared too—scared stiff. Well, who wouldn't be with that awful *thing* prowlin' around ready to claw the insides out'a people in their sleep?"

Anson sat up suddenly.

"What you talkin' 'bout, Bill? What thing? Who's it been clawin'? Hurry up, tell me."

Billy glanced at the window, poorly protected by a cotton mosquito screen, and shivered.

"Nobody knows what it is," he whispered. "Some say it's a gorilla and others say it's a big lynx. Ol' Harry's the only one who saw it, an' he's so clawed and bit he can't describe it to nobody."

"Great Scott! Bill, you mean to say it got ol' Harry?"

Billy nodded. "Yep, last night. He was asleep when that thing climbed in his winder an' tried to suck his blood away."

“ Ugh! ” Anson shuddered and pulled the bed clothes up about his ears. “ How did it get it, Bill? Does anybody know? ”

“ Well, there was a tree standin’ jest outside his winder same as that tree stands outside this one. It climbed that tree and jumped through the mosquito nettin’ plumb onto ol’ Harry. He was able to tell the doctor that much afore he caved under.”

Anson’s blue eyes were staring at the wide unprotected window. Outside, the moon swam hazily above the forest; shadows like huge, misshapen monsters prowled on the sward; weird sounds floated up and died on the still air.

“ Bill,” Anson’s voice was shaking, “ I don’t feel like sleepin’ longside this winder. That awful thing might come shinnin’ up that tree an’ gulp me up. I’m goin’ down and ask Ma if I can’t sleep out in the shed with Moll an’ the pups.”

Billy promptly scented a new danger to his plans. “ If I was you I wouldn’t do that, Anse,” he advised.

“ Well, I’m goin’ to do it.” Anson sat up in bed and peered onto the floor.

“ Where the dickens are my pants? ” he whispered. “ See anythin’ of ’em, Bill? ”

“ Anse,” Billy’s voice was sympathetic. “ I see I have to tell you everythin’. Ma, she’s goin’ to give you the canin’ of your young life, jest as soon as she thinks we’re proper asleep.”

“ Canin’? Me? Whatfer? ”

“ Why, seems she was up here lookin’ fer somethin’ a little while ago. She saw your pants layin’ there an’ she thought maybe they needed patchin’, so she took ’em down with her.”

“ Well, what of it? ”

"Oh, nuthin', only she happened to find a pipe in one of the pockets, that's all."

"Jerusalem!" Anson's teeth chattered. "Well, I'm goin' down anyway. I don't mind a hidin', but I'm derved if I'm goin' to lay here and get clawed up by no gorilla."

"Anse, listen," Billy put a detaining hand on his brother's shoulder. "You don't need to do that, an' you needn't sleep in this bed neither. *I'll sleep in it*, an' you kin sleep in mine. That gorilla, er whatever it is, can't hurt me, cause I've got that rabbit-foot charm that Tom Dodge give me. I'll tie it round my neck."

Anson reflected, shuddering as a long low wail came from the forest.

"That's the boys," Billy told himself. "I've gotta move fast."

Aloud he urged: "Come on, Anse. Get out an' pile into my bed. I ain't scared to sleep in yours, not a bit. Besides," he added, "it'll save you a canin' from Ma."

"How will it, I'd like to know?"

"Why this way. Ma'll come creepin' up here in the dark, when she thinks we're asleep an' she'll come straight to this—your bed. She'll turn down the clothes an' give me a slash or two, thinkin' it's you. I'll let her baste me some—then I'll speak to her. She'll be so surprised she'll ferget all about whalin' you. She's that way, you know. Like as not she'll laugh to think she basted me—an' she'll be good-natured. You needn't worry any about a lickin', Anse."

"Well, I'll take a chance, Bill."

Anson got out of bed, his white legs gleaming in the yellow lamp-light as he tiptoed softly across to Billy's cot and lay down.

Billy blew out the lamp and went through the motions of undressing. He removed one shoe, let it fall on the floor, waited an interval and let the same shoe fall again. Then he put it back on. By and by he lay down and gave a long, weary sigh. Then he held his breath and listened.

Below his window sounded a whippoorwill's call. From the opposite side of the room came the long, regular snores of Anson. Billy sat up in bed and started to remove the tacks from the window screen.

Something fell with a thud against the wall outside, and brushed against the boards. A cat mewed directly beneath the window. Gently Billy rolled the bed quilts into an oblong shape resembling a human form, then silently made his way out of the window.

His feet struck the top round of a ladder. A moment more and he was crouching in the shadow of the wall, two shadowy forms squatting beside him.

"All hunky?" a voice whispered in his ear.

"All hunky," Billy whispered back.

"Then come on."

But Billy plucked at the speaker's sleeve. "Wait a minute, Fatty," he urged. "Anson's up there asleep, an' he's goin' to have a wakin' nightmare in about four seconds. I jest heard Ma goin' up."

Silence, deep and brooding, fell. Then suddenly from the loft came a long wail, followed by a succession of shorter gasps and gulps, and above the swish of a hickory ram-rod a woman's voice exclaiming angrily.

"I'll teach you to smoke on the sly, you young outlaw, you!"

"Now let's get while the gettin's good," whispered Billy; and the three crept off into the shadows.

Down through the night-enshrouded woods the boys

made their way noiselessly, Billy leading, Walter Watland, nicknamed Fatty on account of his size, close behind him and Maurice Keeler, Billy's sworn chum and confidant, bringing up the rear. Occasionally a soft-winged owl fluttered up from its kill, with a muffled "who-who." Once a heavy object plunged from the trail with a snort, and the boys felt the flesh along their spines creeping. They kept on without so much as a word, crossing a swift creek on a fallen tree, holding to its bank and making a detour into the woods to avoid passing close to a dilapidated log cabin which in the moonlight bore evidence of having fallen into disuse. As they skirted the heavy thicket of pines, which even in the summer night's stillness sighed low and mournfully, the leader halted suddenly and a low exclamation fell from his lips.

"Look!" he whispered. "Look! There's a light in the ha'nted house."

His companions crept forward and peered through the trees. Sure enough from the one unglazed window of the old building came the twinkle of a light, which bobbed about in weird, uncertain fashion.

"Old Scroggie's ghost huntin' fer the lost money," whispered Walter, "Oh, gosh! let's leg it!"

"Leg nuthin'!" Billy removed his hand from his trousers-pocket and waved something before two pairs of fear-widened eyes.

"No ghost kin harm where lies this charm," he recited solemnly. "Now if you fellers feel like beatin' it, why beat it; but so long as I'm grabbin' onto this left hind foot of a graveyard rabbit I don't run away from no ghost—not even old man Scroggie's."

"That's all right fer you, Bill," returned Walter, "but what's goin' t' happen t' Maurice an' me, supposin' that

ghost takes a notion to gallop this way? That's what I want'a know! "

Billy turned upon him. " Say, Fatty, haven't I told you that this here charm protects *everybody* with me? " he asked cuttingly.

" There's never been a ghost that ever roamed nights been able to get near it. You kin ask Tom Dodge er any of the other Injuns if there has."

" Oh it might lay an *Injun* ghost," said the unreasonable Fatty, " but how about a white man's? How about old man Scroggie's, fer instance? You know yourself, Bill, old man Scroggie was a tartar. Nobody ever fooled him while he was alive an' nobody need try now he's dead. If he wants to come back here an' snoop round lookin' fer the money he buried an' forgot where, it's his own funeral. I'm fer not mixin' up in this thing any — "

" Keep still! " cautioned Billy, " an' look yonder! See it? "

He pointed through the trees to an open glade in the grove. The full moon, riding high in the sky, threw her light fair upon the fern-sown sod; across the glade a white object was moving — drifting straight toward the watchers. Billy, tightly gripping his rabbit's foot charm in one sweaty hand and a rough-barked sapling in the other, felt Walter's hands clutching his shoulders.

" Oh Jerusalem! " groaned the terrified Fatty, " It's the ghost! Look, it's sheddin' blue grave-mist! Fer the love of Mike let's git out'a this! "

" Wait," gulped Billy, but it was plain to be seen he was wavering. His feet were getting uneasy, his toes fairly biting holes through his socks in their eagerness to tear up the sward. But as leader it would never do for him to show the white feather.

The approaching terror had drifted into the shadow again. Suddenly, so near that it fairly seemed to scorch the frowsy top of the sapling to which he was hanging, a weird blue light twisted upward almost in Billy's eyes. At the same moment a tiny hoot-owl, sleeping off its early evening's feed in the cedar close beside the boys, woke up and gave a ghostly cry. It was too much for overstrained nerves to stand. Billy felt Fatty's form quiver and leap even before his agonized howl fell on his ears — a cry which he and Maurice may have echoed, for all he knew.

They were fully a mile away from the place of terror before sheer exhaustion forced them to abate their wild speed and tumble in a heap beneath a big elm tree, along the trail of the forest.

For a time they lay gasping and quivering. Maurice Keeler was the first to speak. "Say, Bill," he shivered, "is it light enough fer you to see if the hair is scorched off one side o' my head? That — that ghost's breath shot blue flame square in my face."

"It grabbed me in its bony fingers," whispered Fatty. "Gosh, it tore the sleeve fair out'a my shirt. Look!" And to prove the truth of his statement he lifted a fat arm to which adhered a tattered sleeve.

Billy sat up and surveyed his companions with disgust.

"A nice pair of scare-babies you two are," he said, scathingly. "A great pair you are to help me find old Scroggie's will an' money. Why, say, if you'd only kept your nerve a little, that ghost would'a led us right to the spot, most likely; but 'stead o' that you take to your heels at first sight of it. Say! I thought you both had more sand."

Maurice squirmed uncomfortably. "Now look here,

Bill," he protested, "Fatty an' me wasn't any scarter than you was, yourself. Who made the first jump, I want'a know; who?"

"Well, who *did*?" snapped Billy, glowering at his two bosom friends.

"You did," Maurice affirmed. "An' you grabbed Fatty by the arm an' pulled his shirt sleeve out. I saw you. And you can't say you didn't run neither, else how did you get here same time as Fatty an' me?"

"Well, I didn't run, but I own I *follered* you," compromised Billy. "There wasn't anythin' else I could do, was there? How did I know what you two scared rabbits ud do? You might'a run plumb into Lake Erie an' got drowned, you was so scared. Somebody's had to keep his head," he said airily.

"Well I kept mine by havin' a good pair of legs," groaned Fatty. "I'm not denyin' that. And by gravy, if they had been good enough fer a thousand miles I'd've let 'em go the limit. Scared! Oh yowlin' wildcats! I'll see ghosts an' smell brimstone the rest o' my life."

"Boys," cried Billy in awed tones. "It's gone!"

"What's gone?" asked his companions in a breath.

Billy was feeling frantically in his pockets. "My rabbit foot charm," he groaned. "I fell over a log an' it must'a slipped out'a my pocket."

"You had it in your hand when th' ghost poked its blue tongue in our faces," affirmed Maurice. "I saw it."

"You throwed somethin' at the ghost afore you howled an' run," Fatty stated. "Maybe it was the rabbit foot?"

"No ghost kin harm where lies this charm," chuckled Maurice.

Billy turned on him. "If you want'a make fun of a charm, why all right, go ahead," he said coldly. "Only

I know I wouldn't do it, not if I wanted it to save me from a ghost, anyway."

Maurice looked frightened. "I wasn't pokin' fun at the charm, Bill, cross my heart, I wasn't," he said earnestly.

"All right then, see that you don't. Now, see here, I'll tell you somethin'. I *did* throw my rabbit's foot charm but that was to keep that ghost from follerin'. Maybe you two didn't hear it snort when it got to that charm an' tried to pass it, so's to catch up to us; but I heard it. Oh say, but wouldn't it be mad though!"

"An' that's why you throwed it," exclaimed the admiring Maurice. "Gosh, nobody else would'a thought of that."

"Nobody," echoed Fatty, "nobody but Bill."

"Well, somebody has to think in a case o' that kind," admitted Billy, "an' think quick. It was up to me to save you, an' I did the only thing I could think of right then."

Just here the whistle of bob-white sounded from a little distance along the trail.

"That's Elgin Scraff and Tom Holt comin' to look fer us," cried Maurice.

"Answer 'em," said Billy.

Maurice puckered up his lips and gave an answering call. It was returned almost immediately. A moment later two more boys came into the moonlight.

"We wondered what kept you fellers, so came lookin' fer you," spoke Tom Holt as they came up. "Thought you'd be comin' by the tamarack swamp trail, an' we stuck around there fer quite a while, waitin'. Then Elgin said maybe you had come the ha'nted house way, so we struck through the bush an' tried to pick up your trail. Once we thought we saw the ghost, but it turned out to be old

Ringold's white yearlin' steer. It had rubbed up ag'inst some will-o-the-wisp fungus an' it fair showered sparks of blue fire. If we hadn't heered it bawlin' we'd have run sure."

Somewhere behind him Billy heard a giggle, which was immediately suppressed as he turned and looked over his shoulder.

"Yep," he replied, "we saw that steer, too. We've been waitin' here, hopin' we'd hear your whistle. I wonder what time it's gettin' to be?"

Tom Holt, the proud possessor of a watch, consulted it. "Ten twelve an' a half," he answered, holding the dial to the moon-light. "Sandtown 'll be sound asleep. Come on, let's go down to the lake an' make a haul."

"I s'pose we might be goin'," said Billy. "All right, fellers, come along."

Arriving at the lake the boys learned after careful reconnoitering that everything was clear for immediate action. Not a light glimmered from the homes of the fishermen, to show that they were awake and vigilant.

The white-fish run was on and when the boys, launching the big flat-bottomed fish boat, carefully cast and drew in the long seine it held more great gleaming fish than they knew how to dispose of.

"Only one thing to do," reasoned Billy, "take what we want an' let the rest go."

And this they did. When they left the beach the moon was low above the Point pines, the draw-seine was back in its place on the big reel and there was nothing to show the lake fishermen that the Scotia Fish Supply Company had been operating on their grounds.

CHAPTER II

A SHOWER OF FISH

Between the fishermen of Sandtown and the farmers of the community existed no very strong bond of sympathy or friendship. The former were a dissolute, shiftless lot, quite content, with draw-seine and pound-net, to eke out a miserable existence in the easiest manner possible. They were tolerated just as the poor and shiftless of any community are tolerated; their children were allowed to attend the school the same as the children of the taxpayers.

Each spring the farmers attended the fishermen's annual bee of pile-driving, which meant the placing of the stakes for the pound nets — a dangerous and thankless task. Wet, weary and hungry, they would return to their homes at night with considerable more faith in the reward that comes of helping one's fellow-men than in the promise of the fishermen to keep them supplied, gratis, with all the fresh fish they needed during the season.

As far back as any of the farmers could remember the fishermen had made that promise and in no case had it been fulfilled. So they came, in time, to treat it as a joke. Nevertheless, they were always on hand to help with the pile-driving. They were an old-fashioned, simple-hearted people, content with following the teachings of their good Book — "Cast thy bread upon the waters, for thou shalt find it after many days."

And find it they did, ultimately, in a mysterious and unexpected way. One late June morning each of the

farmers who had for season after season toiled with those fishermen without faintest hope of earthly reward awoke to find a mess of fresh lake fish hanging just outside their respective doors. It was a great and wonderful revelation. The circuit minister, Rev. Mr. Reddick, whose love for and trust in his fellow-men was all-embracing, wept when the intelligence was imparted to him, and took for his text on the Sunday following a passage of scripture dealing with the true reward of unselfish serving. It was a stirring sermon, the rebuke of a father to his children who had erred.

“Oh ye of little faith,” he concluded, “let this be a lesson to you; and those of you, my brothers, whose judgment of humanity has been warped through God-given prosperity, get down on your knees and pray humbly for light, remembering that *Christ believed in His fishermen.*”

At the conclusion of the service, Deacon Ringold called a few of the leading church members together and to them spoke his mind thus:

“Brothers, you heard what our minister said, an’ he’s right. I, fer one, am ashamed of the thoughts I’ve thought to’rds them fishermen of Sandtown. I’ve acted mean to ’em in lots of ways, I’ll admit. An’ so have you—you can’t deny it!”

The deacon, a florid, full-whiskered man of about sixty, glowered about him. No one present thought of disputing his assertion. The deacon was a power in the community.

“I tell you, brothers,” he continued, waxing eloquent, “the old devil is pretty smooth and he’ll get inside the guard of Christianity every time unless we keep him barred by acts of Christly example. I have been downright contemptuous to them poor sand folks; I have so!

Time and ag'in I've refused 'em even the apples rottin' on the ground in my orchard. Now, I tell you what I'm goin' to do. I'm goin' to load up my wagon with such fruit an' vegetables as they never get a smell of, an' I'm goin' to drive down there and distribute it among 'em. I ain't suggestin' that you men do likewise—that's between you and your conscience—but," he added, glaring about him, "I'd like to know if any of you has any suggestions to make."

A tall, sad-visaged man rose slowly from his seat and took a few steps up the aisle. Like the others he was full bearded; like them his hands bore the calluses of honest toil.

"Fisherman Shipley wanted to buy a cow from me on time," he said. "I refused him. If you don't mind, Deacon, I'll lead her down behind your wagon tomorrow."

Ringold nodded approval. "All right, Neighbor Watland. Anybody else got anythin' to say?"

A short, heavy set man stirred in his seat, and spoke without rising. "I'm only a poor workin'-man, without anythin' to give but the strength of my arm, but I'm willin' to go down and help them fishermen build their smoke-houses. I'm a pretty good carpenter, as you men know."

"That you are, Jim," agreed the deacon heartily. "We'll tell 'em that Jim Glover 'll be down to give 'em a hand soon."

One by one others got up and made their little offers. Cobin Keeler, a giant in stature, combed his flowing beard with his fingers and announced he'd bring along a load of green corn-fodder. Gamp Stevens promised three bags of potatoes. Joe Scraff, a little man with a thin voice, said he had some lumber that the fishermen might as well be using for their smoke-houses. Each of the others present

offered to do his part, and then the men separated for their several homes.

"Understand, brothers," the deacon admonished as they parted, "we must be careful not to let them poor, ignorant people think we're doin' this little act of Christianity because they've seen fit to fulfill their promise to us regardin' fish. That would spoil the spirit of our givin'. Let not one man among us so much as mention fish. Brotherly kindness, Christian example. That's our motto, brothers, and we'll foller it."

"You're right, Deacon," spoke Cobin Keeler.

"He's always right," commented Scraff, who owed the deacon a couple of hundred dollars. "An'," he added, "while we're hangin' strictly to Bible teachin', might it not be a good idea fer us not to let our left hand know what our right hand's doin'?"

"Meanin' outsiders?" questioned Keeler.

"Outsiders and insiders as well; our wives fer instance." Scraff had a mental vision of a certain woman objecting strenuously to the part he hoped personally to play in the giving.

"Humph," said the deacon, "Joe Scraff may be right at that. Maybe it would be just as well if we kept our own counsel in this matter, brothers. Tomorrow mornin', early, let each of us prepare his offerin' and depart fer the lake. We'll meet there and make what distribution of our gifts as seems fair to them cheats—I mean them poor, misguided fishermen," he corrected hurriedly.

And so they parted with this understanding. And when their footsteps had died away, a small, dusty boy crawled out from under the penitent bench, slipped like a shadow to a window, opened it and dropped outside.

By mid-afternoon Billy Wilson's boon companions had

learned from him that a good-will offering was to be made the fishermen of Sandtown by the people of Scotia. It was a terrible disgrace — a dangerous state of affairs. The hated Sand-sharkers merited nothing and should receive nothing, if Billy and his friends could help it. Immediate action was necessary if the plan of the farmers was to be frustrated and the outlaw fishermen kept in their proper place. So Billy and his friends held a little caucus in the beach grove behind the school-house. For two hours they talked together in low tones. Then Billy arose and crept stealthily away through the trees. The others silently separated.

* * * * *

Sunset was streaking the pine tops with spun gold and edging the gorgeous fabric with crimson ribbons; the big lake lay like an opal set in coral. Fishermen Shipley and Sward, seated on the bow of their old fish-boat, were idly watching the scene when Billy Wilson approached, hands in pockets and gravely surveyed them.

Shipley was a small, wizened man with scant beard and hair. He wheezed a "Hello, Sonny" at Billy, while he packed the tobacco home in his short, black pipe with a claw-like finger.

His companion, a tall, thin man, grinned, but said nothing. His red hair was long and straggly; splashes of coal-tar besmeared him from the neckband of his greasy shirt to the bottoms of his much-patched overalls.

"What dye you want, boy?" Shipley's pipe was alight now and he peered down at Billy through the pungent smoke-wreaths.

"I was sent down here to give you a message, Mr. Shipley," said Billy.

"Well, what is it, then? Who sent you? Come now,

out with it quick, or I'll take a tarred rope-end to you."

"It was Deacon Ringold sent me," Billy answered. "He told me to tell you that he's got to turn his pigs into the orchard tomorrow an' that you an' the other people here might as well come an' gather up the apples on the ground if you want 'em."

"What!" Shipley and Sward started so forcibly that their heads came together with a bump. "So the old skinflint is goin' to give us his down apples, is he?" wheezed Shipley. "Well, he ain't givin' much, but we'll come over tonight and get 'em. It's a wonder the old hypocrite would let us gather 'em on Sunday night, ain't it, Benjamin?" he addressed his companion.

"He's afeerd they'll make his hogs sick most like," sneered Sward.

"He says, if you don't mind, to come about ten or 'leven o'clock," said Billy.

Shipley threw back his head and chuckled a wheezing laugh. "Loramity! Benjamin," he choked, "can't you get his reason fer that? He wants to make sure that all the prayer-meetin' folks will be gone home. It wouldn't do fer 'em to see us helpin' keep the deacon's pigs from cholery. Ain't that like the smooth old weasel, though?"

"What'll I tell Mr. Ringold?" asked Billy as he turned to go.

"You might tell him that he's an angel if you want'er lie to him," returned Shipley, "or that he's a canny old skin-flint, if you want'er tell him the truth. I reckon, though, sonny, you best tell him that we'll be along 'tween ten and 'leven.

"That's a nice lookin' youngster," remarked Sward, as Billy was lost among the pines. "Notice the big eyes of him, Jack?"

"Yes. Oh, I daresay the boy's all right, Benjamin, but he belongs to them Scotians and they're no friends of ourn. I reckon I scared him some when I threatened to give him the rope, eh?"

"Well, he wasn't givin' no signs that you did," Sward returned, "he seemed to me to be tryin' his best to keep from laughin' in your face."

"By thunder! did he now?"

"Fact, Jack. Seems to me them young Scotians don't scare very easy. However," sliding off the boat, "that ain't gettin' ready for the apple gatherin'. Let's go and mosey up some sacks and get the others in line."

Shipley laid a claw-like hand on his friend's arm and turned his rheumy eyes on Sward's blinking blue ones. "Benjamin, we're goin' after the deacon's apples, *but we ain't goin' to take no windfalls.*"

"You mean we'll strip the trees, Jack?" exulted Sward.

"Exactly. And, Benjamin, kin you imagine the old deacon's face in the mornin' when he sees what we've done?" And the two cronies went off laughing over their prospective raid.

* * * * *

Sunday-night prayer meeting was just over. The worshippers had gone from the church in twos and threes. Deacon Ringold had remained behind to extinguish the church lights and lock up. As he stepped from the porch into the shadows along the path, a small hand gripped his arm.

"Hello!" exclaimed the startled deacon. "Why, bless us, it's a boy! Who are you, and what do you want?"

Apparently the boy did not hear the first question. "Mr. Ringold," he whispered, "I waited here to see

you. The Sandtown fishermen are comin' to rob your orchard tonight."

"What?" The deacon gripped the boy's arm and shook him. "What's that you say?" he questioned eagerly.

"I was down to the lake this evenin'," said the boy, "an' I heard Shipley and Sward talkin' together. They was plannin' a raid on your orchard tonight."

Mr. Ringold fairly gasped. "Oh, the thankless, misguided wretches!" he exclaimed. "And to think that we were foolish enough to feel that we hadn't treated 'em with Christian kindness. Did you hear 'em say what time they was comin', boy?"

"Yes sir. They said 'bout half-past ten."

"Well, I'll be on hand to receive 'em," the deacon promised, "and if I don't teach them thieves and rogues a lesson it'll be a joke on me. Now I must run on and catch up with Cobin Keeler and the rest o' the neighbors. They've got to know about this, so, if you'll jest tell me your name—why, bless me, the boy's gone!"

The deacon stood perplexedly scratching his head. Then he started forward on a run to tell those who had planned with him a little surprise gift for the fishermen of the perfidy of human nature.

That night the fishermen of Sandtown were caught red-handed, stealing Deacon Ringold's harvest apples. Like hungry ants scenting sugar they descended upon that orchard, en masse, at exactly ten-thirty o'clock. By ten-forty they had done more damage to the hanging fruit than a wind storm could do in an hour and at ten-forty-five they were pounced upon by the angry deacon and his neighbors and given the lecture of their lives. In vain they pleaded that it was all a mistake, that they had been

sent an invitation via a small boy, from the deacon himself.

Ringold simply growled "lying ingrates," and bade them begone and never again to so much as dare lay a boot-sole on his or his neighbors' property. And so they went, and with them went all hope of a possible drawing together in Christian brotherhood of the two factions.

"Brothers," spoke the deacon sadly, as he and his neighbors were about to separate, "I doubt if we have displayed the proper Christian spirit, but even a Christian must protect his property. Oh, why didn't some small voice whisper to them poor misguided people and warn 'em to be patient and all would be well."

"It means, o' course, that we'll get no more fish," spoke up the practical Scraff.

"Oh yes you will," spoke a voice, seemingly above their heads.

"Oh yes you will," echoed another voice on the left, and on the right still another voice chanted. "You will, you will."

"Mercies on us!" cried the amazed deacon, clutching the fence for support. "Whose voice was that? You heard it, men. Whose was it?"

The others stood, awed, frightened.

"There was three voices," whispered Scraff. "They seemed to be scattered among the trees. It's black magic, that's what it is—or old Scroggie's ghost," he finished with a shudder.

"Joe, I'm ashamed of you," chided the white-faced deacon. "Come along to my house, all of you, and I'll have wife make us a strong cup of tea."

They passed on, and then from the sable-hued cedars bordering the orchard four small figures stole and moved softly away.

Once safely out on the road they paused to look back.

"Boys," whispered Billy, "she worked fine. Them Sand-sharkers are goin' to stay where they belong. An', fellers, seein' as we've promised fish, fish it's gotta be." And so was formed the Scotia Fish Supply Company.

Four shadowy forms drifted apart and were lost in deeper shadows. The golden moon rode peacefully in the summer sky.

CHAPTER III

APPRAISING THE NEW TEACHER

The morning wood-mists were warm, sweet-scented; the wood-birds' song of thanksgiving was glad with the essence of God-given life. But the man astride the dejected and weary horse saw none of the beauties of his surroundings, heard none of the harmony, experienced none of the exhilaration of the life all about him, as he rode slowly down the winding trail between the trees. He sat erect in his saddle, eyes fixed straight before him. His face was strong and seamed with tiny lines. The prominence of his features was accentuated by the thinness of the face. Beady black eyes burned beneath the shadows of heavy brows. A shock of iron-grey hair brushed his shoulders. In one hand he held a leather-bound book, a long thumb fixed on the printed page from which his attention had been momentarily diverted by his survey of the woodland scene.

"Desolation!" he murmured, "desolation! the natural home of ignorance."

At the sound of his voice the old horse stood still. "Thomas," cried the rider sternly, "did I command you to halt?"

From his leather boot-leg he extracted a long wand of seasoned hickory and brought it down on the bay flank with a cutting swish. The hickory represented the symbol of progress to Mr. George G. Johnston, the new teacher of Scotia school. Certain it was it had the desired effect in this particular instance. The aged horse broke into a

jerky gallop which soon carried the rider out into more open country.

Here farms, hemmed in by rude rail-fences, looked up from valley and hillside. Occasionally a house of greater pretensions than its fellows, and built of unplanned lumber, gleamed in the morning sunlight in gay contrast to the dun-colored log ones. But the eternal forest, the primitive offering of earth's first substance, obtruded even here, and the rider's face set in a frown as he surveyed the vista before him.

Descending into a valley he saw that the farm homes, which from the height seemed closely set together, were really quite a distance from each other. He reined up before a small frame house and, dismounting, allowed his hungry horse to crop the grass, as he opened the gate and made up the path. A shaggie collie bounded around the corner of the building and down to meet him, bristles erect and all the antagonism of a bush-dog for a stranger in its bearing. It was followed by a big man and a boy.

"Here you, Joe, come back here and behave yourself," the master thundered and the dog turned and slunk back along the path.

"Mornin', sir," greeted Cobin Keeler.

In one hand he carried a huge butcher-knife, in the other a long whetstone. More big knives glittered in the leather belt about his waist. "Jest sharpenin' my knives ag'in the hog-killin'," he explained, noting the stranger's startled look.

The teacher advanced, his fears at rest. "My name is Johnston," he said, "George G. Johnston. I was directed here, sir. You are Mr. Keeler, are you not, one of the trustees of the school of which I am to have charge?"

Keeler thrust out a huge hand. "That's me," he

answered. "You're jest in time fer breakfast. It's nigh ready. Come 'round back an' wash up. Maurice, go put the teacher's horse in the stable an' give him a feed."

The teacher followed his host, gingerly rubbing the knuckles which had been left blue by the farmer's strong grip.

The boy, who had been studying the man before him, turned away to execute his father's order. If he knew anything about teachers — and he did — he and the other lads of the community were in for a high old time, he told himself. He went down to the gate, the dog trotting at his heels.

"Joe," he commanded, "go back home," and the collie lay down on the path, head between his forepaws.

The boy went out through the gate and approached the feeding horse cautiously. His quick eyes appraised its lean sides and noted the long welt made by the hickory on the clearly outlined ribs beneath the bay hide.

"Poor ol' beggar," he said gently.

At the sound of his voice the horse lifted his head and gazed at the boy in seeming surprise. A wisp of grass dangled from his mouth; his ears pricked forward. Perhaps something in the boy's voice recalled a voice he had known far back along his checkered life, when he was a colt and a bare-legged youngster fed him sugar and rode astride his back.

"He ought'a get a taste o' the gad hisself," muttered Maurice. "An' he's goin' to be our teacher, oh, Gosh! Well, I kin see where me an' Billy Wilson gets oun — maybe."

He patted the horse's thin neck. "Come, ol' feller, I'll stuff you with good oats fer once," he promised.

The horse reached forward his long muzzle and lipped

one of the boy's ears. "Say horses don't understand!" grinned Maurice. "Gee! I guess maybe they do understand, though."

He gave the horse another pat and led him down the path into the stable. As he unsaddled him Maurice noticed the hickory wand which Mr. Johnston had left inserted between the upper loops of a stirrup.

"Hully gee! ol' feller, look!" Maurice extracted the wand and held it up before the animal's gaze. "Oh, don't put your ears back an' grin at me. I ain't goin' to use it on you," laughed the lad. "Look! This is what I'm goin' to do with that ol' bruiser's pointer." From a trouser's pocket he extracted a jackknife. "Now horsie, jest you watch me close. The next time he makes a cut at you he's goin' to get the surprise of his life. There, see? I've cut it through. Now I'll jest rub on some of this here clay to hide the cut. There you be! If I know anythin' 'bout seasoned hickory that pointer's goin' to split into needles right in his hand. I hope they go through his ol' fist and clinch on t'other side."

Maurice gave the tired horse a feed of oats, tossed a bundle of timothy into the manger, slapped the bay flank once again and went up the path to his breakfast.

Mrs. Keeler, a swarthy woman, almost as broad as she was tall, and with an habitual cloud of gloom on her features, met him at the door. She was very deaf and spoke in the loud, querulous tone so often used by people suffering from that affliction.

"Have you seen him?" she shouted. "What you think of him, Maurice?"

Maurice drew her outside and closed the door. "Come over behind the woodpile, Ma, an' I'll tell you," he answered cautiously.

"No, tell me here."

"Can't. He might hear me."

"Then you ain't took to that new teacher, Maurice?"

"Not what you'd notice, Ma. He ain't any like Mr. Stanhope. His face — I ain't likin' it a bit. Besides, Ma, he flogs his poor horse somethin' awful."

"How do you know that?" asked the mother, eying him sharply.

"Cause he left long welts on him. He's out in the stable. Go see fer yourself."

"No, I ain't got time. I got t' fry some more eggs an' ham. Go 'long in to your breakfast, an' see you keep your mouth shut durin' the meal. An' look here," she admonished, "if I ketch you apullin' the cat's tail durin' after-breakfast prayers I'll wollop you till you can't stand."

Maurice meekly followed his mother inside and slipped into his accustomed place at the table.

Mr. Johnston was certainly doing justice to the crisp ham and eggs on the platter before him. Occasionally he lifted his black eyes to flash a look at his host, who was entertaining him with the history of the settlement and its people.

"You'll find Deacon Ringold a man whose word is as good as his bond," Cobin was saying. "I'm married to his sister, Hannah, but I ain't sayin' this on that account. The deacon is a right good livin' man, fond of his own opinions an' all that, an' close on a bargain, but a good Christian man. He's better off than anybody else in these parts. But what he got he got honest. I'll say that, even if he is my own brother-in-law."

"Yes, yes," spoke Mr. Johnston, impatiently. "No doubt I shall get to know Mr. Ringold very well. Now, sir, concerning your other neighbors?" Mr. Johnston

held a dripping yolk of egg poised, peering from beneath his brows at his host.

"Well, there's the Proctors, five families of 'em an' every last one of 'em a brother to the other."

"Meaning, I presume, that there are five brothers by the name of Proctor living in the community."

"By Gosh, you've hit it right on the head. That's what eddication does fer a man—makes him sharp as a razor. Yes, they're brothers an' so much alike all I've got to do is describe one of 'em an' you have 'em all."

"Remarkable," murmured Mr. Johnston. "Remarkable, indeed!"

"Did you say more tea, teacher?" Mrs. Keeler was at his elbow, steaming tea-pot in hand.

"Thank you, I will have another cup," Mr. Johnston answered, and turned his eyes back to Cobin.

"You have a neighbor named Stanhope, my predecessor, I understand," he said slowly.

"I'm proud to say we have, sir," beamed Keeler, "an' a squarer, finer young man never lived. A mighty good teacher he was too, let me tell you."

"I have no doubt. I have heard sterling reports of him; if he erred in his task it was because he was too lenient. Tell me, Mr. Keeler, is there not some history attached to him concerning a will, or property left by a man by the name of Scroggie? I'll admit I have no motive in so questioning save that of curiosity, but one wishes to know all one can learn about the man one is to follow. Is that not so, ma'am?" he asked, turning to the watchful hostess.

"More ham? Certainly." Mrs. Keeler came forward with a platter, newly fried, and scraped two generous slices onto Mr. Johnston's plate. "Now, sir, don't you

be affeard to holler out when you want more," said the hospitable housewife.

"Ma's deafness makes her misunderstan' sometimes," Cobin explained in an undertone to the teacher. "But I was jest about to tell you Mr. Stanhope's strange history, sir, an' about ol' Scroggie's will. You see the Stanhopes was the very first to drop in here an' take up land, father an' son named Frank, who wasn't much more'n a boy, but with a mighty good eddication.

"Roger Stanhope didn't live long but while he lived he was a right good sort of man to foller an' before he died he had the satisfaction of seein' the place in which he was one of the first to settle grow up into a real neighborhood. Young Frank had growed into a big, strappin' feller by this time an' took hold of the work his father had begun, an' I must say he did marvels in the clearin' an' burnin'.

"So things went along fer a few years. Then come a letter from England to Roger Stanhope. Frank read it to me. Seems they wanted Stanhope back home, if he was alive; if not they wanted his son to come. Frank didn't even answer that letter. He says to me, 'Mr. Keeler, this spot's good enough fer me.' An' by gosh! he stayed.

"When this settlement growed big enough fer a school, young Frank, who had a school teacher's diploma, offered to teach it. His farm was pretty well cleared by this time, so he got a man named Henry Burke to work it fer him an' Burke's wife to keep house. That was five years ago, an' Frank has taught the Valley School ever since, till now."

Keeler paused, and sighed deeply. "'Course, sir, you've heerd what happened an' how? He was tryin' to save some horses from a burnin' stable. A blazin' beam fell

across his face; his eyes they — ” Keeler’s voice grew husky.

“ I’ve heard,” said Mr. Johnston. “ His was a brave and commendable act.”

“ But he did a braver thing than that,” cried Cobin. “ He giv’ up the girl who was to marry him, ’cause, he said, his days from now on must be useless ones, an’ he wouldn’t bind the woman he loved to his bleakness an’ blackness. Them was his very words, sir.”

To this Mr. Johnston made no audible reply. He simply nodded, waiting with suspended fork, for his narrator to resume.

“ Concerning the purported will of the eccentric Mr. Scroggie? ” he ventured at length, his host having lapsed into silence.

Keeler roused himself from his abstraction and resumed: “ Right next to the Stanhope farm there stood about a thousand acres of the purtiest hardwoods you ever clap’t an eye on, sir. An ol’ hermit of a drunken Scotchman, Scroggie by name, owned that land. He lived in a dirty little cabin an’ was so mean even the mice was scared to eat the food he scrimped himself on. He had money too, lots an’ lots of gold money. I’ve seen it myself. He kept it hid somewhere.

“ When the Stanhopes built their home on the farm, which was then mostly woods, old Scroggie behaved somethin’ awful. He threatened to shoot Stanhope. But Stanhope only laughed an’ went on with his cuttin’ an’ stump-pullin’. Scroggie used to swear he’d murder both of ’em, an’ he was always sayin’ that if he died his ghost would come back an’ ha’nt the Stanhopes. Yes, he said that once in my own hearin’.

“ One night, two years after Roger Stanhope died, old

Scroggie got drunk an' would have froze to death if Frank hadn't found him an' carried him into his own home. Scroggie cursed Frank fer it when he came round but Frank paid no attention to him. After that, Scroggie—who was too sick to be moved—got to takin' long spells of quiet. He would jest set still an' watch Frank nights when the two was alone together.

“After a while the old man got strong enough to go home. Soon after that he disappeared an' stayed away fer nearly three weeks. Then, all at once, he turned up at home ag'in. He came over to Stanhope's house every now an' ag'in to visit with him. One night he says to Frank after they had had supper: ‘Frank,’ says he, ‘I've been over to Cleveland an' I've made my will. I've left you everythin' I own. You're the only decent person I've known since I lost my ol' mother. I want that thousand acre woods to stand jest as God made it as long as I'm alive; when I die you kin do what you like with it.’ Then afore Frank could even thank him the old man got up an' hobbled out.

“Next mornin’,” continued Cobin, “Frank went over to see old Scroggie. He wanted to hear him say what he told him the night afore, ag'in. It was gettin' along towards spring; the day was warm an' smelled of maple sap. Scroggie's cabin door was standin' ajar, Frank says. The ol' man was sittin' in his chair, a Bible upside down on his knees. He was dead!

“Frank told Mr. Reddick, the preacher who came to bury old Scroggie, all that had passed between him an' the dead man but although they hunted high an' low fer the will, they never found it. Nor did they find any of the money the ol' miser must have left behind—not a solitary cent. That was over a year ago, an' they haven't

found money or will yet. But this goes to show what a real feller Frank Stanhope is. He put a fine grave stone up for ol' Scroggie an' had his name engraved on it. Yes he done that, an' all he ever got from the dead man was his curses.

"Well, soon after they put old Scroggie under the sod, along comes a nephew of the dead man. No doubt in the world he was Scroggie's nephew. He looked like him, an' besides he had the papers to prove his claim that he was the dead man's only livin' relative. An' as Scroggie hadn't left no will, this man was rightful heir to what he had left behin', 'cordin' to law. He spent a week er two prowlin' round, huntin' fer the dead man's buried money. At last he got disgusted huntin' an' findin' nuthin' an' went away."

"And he left no address behind?" questioned Mr. Johnston.

"He surely did not," answered Cobin. "Nobody knows where he went— nor cares. But nobody can do anythin' with that timber without his sayso. It's a year or more since ol' Scroggie died. People do say that his ghost floats about the old cabin, at nights, but of course that can't be, sir."

"Superstitious nonsense," scoffed the teacher. "And so the will was never found?"

"No, er the buried money," sighed Cobin.

Mr. Johnston pushed his chair back from the table. "Thank you exceedingly, Mr. Keeler. I have enjoyed your breakfast and your conversation very much indeed. Madam," he said, rising and turning to Mrs. Keeler, "permit me to extend to you my heartfelt gratitude for your share in the splendid hospitality that has been accorded me. I hope to see you again, some day."

“Certainly,” returned Mrs. Keeler, “Cobin! Maurice! kneel down beside your chairs. The teacher wants to pray.”

Mr. Johnston frowned, then observing his host and hostess fall to their knees, he too got stiffly down beside his chair. He prayed long and fervently and ended by asking God to help him lead these people from the shadow into enlightenment.

It was during that prayer that Maurice, chancing to glance at the window, saw Billy Wilson’s pet crow, Croaker, peering in at him with black eyes. Now, as Croaker often acted as carrier between the boys, his presence meant only one thing — Billy had sent him some message. Cautiously Maurice got down on all fours and crept toward the door.

“Now teacher,” said Keeler, the prayer over, “you jest set still, an’ I’ll send Maurice out after your horse.”

He glanced around in search of the boy. “Why, bless my soul, he’s gone!” he exclaimed. “There’s a youngster you’ll need to watch close, teacher,” he said grimly.

“Well sir, you jest rest easy an’ I’ll get your horse myself.”

CHAPTER IV

THE MESSAGE CROAKER BROUGHT

“ Missus Wilson, where’s Billy? ”

Mrs. Wilson turned to the door, wiped her red face on her apron, and finished emptying a pan of hot cookies into the stone crock, before answering, sternly:

“ He’s down to the far medder, watchin’ the gap, Maurice. Don’t you go near him.”

“ No ma’am, I won’t. Jest wondered where he was, that’s all.”

“ I ’low you’re tryin’ to coax him away fishin’ er somethin’.”

“ Oh, no ma’am. I gotta get right back home to Ma. She’s not very well, an’ she’ll be needin’ me.”

“ Fer land sakes! you don’t say so, Maurice. Is she very bad? ” The tones were sympathetic now. Maurice nodded, and glanced longingly at the fresh batch of brown cookies.

“ She was carryin’ the big meat-platter on her arm an’ she fell with her arm under her — an’ broke it.”

“ Lord love us! ” Mrs. Wilson started to undo her apron. “ Why didn’t you tell me before, you freckle-faced jackass, you! Lord knows what use you boys are anyways! Think of you, hangin’ ’round here askin’ fer Billy and your poor Ma at home groanin’ in pain an’ needin’ help. Ain’t you ’shamed of yourself? ”

“ Yes ma’am,” admitted Maurice cheerfully. “ I guess I should’a told you first off but Ma she said if you was busy not to say anythin’ ’bout her breakin’ it.”

"Well, we'll see about that. No neighbor in this here settlement is ever goin' to say that Mary Wilson ever turned her back on a feller-bein's distress. I'll go right over to your place with you now, Maurice. Come along."

Mrs. Wilson was outside, by this time, and tying on her sun-bonnet. Maurice held back. She grasped his arm and hustled him down the walk.

"Is it broke bad, Maurice?" she asked anxiously.

Maurice, peering about among the trees, answered absently.

"Yes ma'am. I guess she'll never be able to use it ag'in."

"Oh pity sake! Let's hurry."

Maurice was compelled to quicken his steps in order to keep up to the long strides of the anxious woman. Suddenly he halted. "Missis Wilson," he said, "you fergot to take that last pan o' cookies out'a the oven."

The woman raised her hands in consternation.

"So I did," she exclaimed. "You stay right here an' I'll go back and take it out now."

"Let me go," said Maurice quickly. "I know jest how to do it an' kin get through in less'n half the time it'll take you."

"Well, run along then. I best keep right on. Your poor Ma 'll be needin' me."

Maurice was off like a shot. As he rounded the house on a lope he ran into Billy, coming from the opposite direction. Billy's cotton blouse was bulging. In one hand he carried the smoking bake-pan, in the other a fat cookie deeply scalloped on one side.

"Where you goin' so fast, Maurice?" he accosted, his mouth full.

Maurice glanced fearfully over his shoulder. "Hush,

Bill. If your Ma happens to come back here it'll go bad with me."

Billy held out the pan to his chum and waited until Maurice had filled his pockets. Then he asked: "Where's she gone?"

"Over to our place. I told her about Ma fallin' an' breakin' the meat-platter, an' I guess she misunderstood. She tried to take me along with her. I had an awful time to get 'way from her."

Billy laughed. "Gee! Ma's like that. Nobody gets 'way from her very easy. Here, fill your shirt with the rest o' these cookies, an' I'll take the pan back; then we'll be goin'."

"Fish ought'a bite fine today," said Maurice as he stowed the cookies away in his bosom.

"You bet. The wind's south. Have you got the worms dug?"

"Yep. They're in a can in my pocket. Did Croaker come back?" he inquired, as the two made their way down the path.

"Sure he came back. He's a wise crow, that Croaker, an', Oh gosh! don't he hate Ma, though! He gets up in a tree out o' reach of her broom, an' jest don't he call her names in crow talk? Ma says she'll kill him if ever she gets close enough to him an' she will, too."

"Well sir, I nigh died when I seen him settin' on our winder-sill," laughed Maurice. "We was havin' mornin' prayer; the new teacher was at our place an' he was prayin'. Croaker strutted up an' down the sill, peerin' in an' openin' an' shuttin' his mouth like he was callin' that old hawk-faced teacher every name he could think of. I saw he had a paper tied 'round his neck so I crawled on my hands an' knees past Ma, an' slipped out. If Ma

hadn't been so deaf, she'd have heard me an' nabbed me sure."

Billy chuckled. "Then you got my message off of Croaker, Maurice?"

"Yep; but by jinks! I had a awful time guessin' what you meant by them marks you made on the paper. Darn it all, Bill, why can't you write what you want 'a say, instead of makin' marks that nobody kin understan'?"

"There you go, ag'in," cried Billy. "How many times have I gotta tell you, Maurice, that Trigger Finger Tim



never used writin'. He used symbols—that's what he used. Do you know what a symbol is, you poor block-head?"

"I should say I do. It's a brass cap what women use to keep the needle from runnin' under their finger-nail."

"Naw, Maurice. A symbol is a mark what means somethin'. Have you got that message I sent you? Well, give it here an' I'll show you. Now then, you see them two marks standin' up 'longside each other?"

"Yep."

"Well, what do you think they stand fer?"

"I thought maybe you meant 'em fer a couple of trees, Bill."

“ Well I didn’t. Them two marks are symbols, signifyin’ a gap.”

“ A gap? Hully Gee! ”

“ Yep, an’ this here animal settin’ in that gap, what you think it is?”

Maurice shook his head. “ It’s maybe a cow? ” he guessed hopefully.

“ Nope, it’s a dog. Now then, you see these two boys runnin’ away from the gap? ”

“ Gosh, is that what they be, Bill? Yep, I see ’em.”

“ Well, that’s me an’ you. Now then, what you s’pose I meant by them symbols? I meant this. *I’ve gotta watch gap. Fetch your dog over an’ we’ll set him to watch it, an’ we’ll skin out an’ go fishin’.*”

Maurice whistled. “ Well I’ll be jiggered! ” he exclaimed. “ I wish’t I’d knowed that. Say, tell you what I’ll do. I’ll sneak up through the woods an’ whistle Joe over here now.”

“ No, never mind. I bribed Anse to watch that gap fer me.”

“ What did you have t’ give him? ”

“ Nuthin’. Promised I wouldn’t tell him no ghost stories fer a week if he’d help me out.”

They had topped a wooded hill and were descending into a wide green valley, studded with clumps of red willows and sloping towards a winding stretch of pale green rushes through which the white face of the creek flashed as though in a smile of welcome. Red winged blackbirds clarioned shrilly from rush and cat-tail. A brown bittern rose solemnly and made across the marsh in ungainly flight. A blue crane, frogging in the shallows, paused in its task with long neck stretched, then got slowly to wing, long pipe-stem legs thrust straight out

behind. A pair of nesting black ducks arose with soft quacks and drifted up and out, bayward.

Billy, who stood still to watch them, was recalled suddenly to earth by his companion's voice.

"Bill, our punt's gone!"

With a bound, Billy was beside him, and peering through the rushes into the tiny bay in which they kept their boat.

"Well, Gee whitticker!" he exclaimed. "Who do you s'pose had the nerve to take it?"

Maurice shook his head. "None of our gang 'ud take it," he said. "Likely some of them Sand-sharks."

"That's so," Billy broke off a marsh-flag and champed it in his teeth.

Maurice was climbing a tall poplar standing on the bank of the creek. "I say, Billy," he cried excitedly. "There she is, jest 'round the bend. They've beached her in that piece of woods. It's Joe LaRose an' Art Shipley that took her, I'll bet a cookie. They're always goin' 'cross there to hunt fer turtle's eggs."

"Then come on!" shouted Billy.

"Where to?"

"Down opposite the punt. I'm goin' t' strip an' swim across after her."

Maurice dropped like a squirrel from the poplar. "An' leave them boat thieves stranded?" he panted. "Oh gosh! but won't that serve 'em right!"

"Let's hustle," urged Billy. "They may come back any minute."

They ran quickly up the valley, Billy unfastening his few garments as they ran. By the time Billy had reached the bend he was in readiness for the swim across. Without a thought of the long leeches—"blood-suckers" the boys called them—which lay on the oozy bottom of the

creek's shallows ready to fasten on the first bare foot that came their way, he waded out toward the channel.

"Bill, watch out!" warned Maurice. "There's a big womper coiled on that lily-root. You're makin' right fer it."

"I see it," returned Billy. "I guess I ain't scared of no snakes in these parts."

"But this beggar is coiled," cried his friend. "If he strikes you, he'll rip you wide open with his horny nose. Don't go, Bill."

"Bah! he's uncoilin', Maurice; he'll slip off, see if he don't. There, what did I tell you?" as the long mottled snake slid softly into the water. "You can't tell me anythin' 'bout wompers."

"But what if a snappin'-turtle should get hold of your toe?" shuddered Maurice.

"Shut up!" Billy commanded. "Do you want them Sand-sharks to hear you? You keep still now, I'm goin' after our punt."

Billy was out in mid stream now, swimming with swift, noiseless strokes toward the boat. Just as he reached it the willows along shore parted and two boys, both larger than himself, made a leap for the punt. Billy threw himself into the boat and as the taller of the two jumped for it his fist shot out and caught him fairly on the jaw. He toppled back half into the water. Billy seized the paddle and swung it back over his shoulder. The other boy halted in his tracks. Another moment and the punt was floating out in midstream.

LaRose had crawled to shore and sat dripping and sniffing on the bank.

"Now, maybe the next time you boat-thieves find a punt you'll think twice afore you take it," shouted Billy.

"How're we goin' to get back 'cross the crick?" whined the vanquished LaRose.

"Swim it, same's I did," Billy called back.

"But the snakes an' turtles!" wailed the marooned pair.

"You gotta take a chance. I took one." Billy urged the punt forward across the creek to where the grinning and highly delighted Maurice waited.

"Jump in here, an' let's get fishin'."

Maurice lost no time. "Where'll we go, Bill?"

"Up to the mouth. There's green bass up there an' lots of small frogs, if we need 'em, fer bait."

CHAPTER V

A WILDERNESS MERCHANT

Caleb Spencer, proprietor of the Twin Oaks store, paused at his garden gate to light his corn-cob pipe. The next three hours would be his busy time. The farmers of Scotia would come driving in for their mail and to make necessary purchases of his wares. His pipe alight to his satisfaction, Caleb crossed the road, then stood still in his tracks to fasten his admiring gaze on the rambling, unpainted building which was his pride and joy. He had built that store himself. With indefatigable pains and patience he had fashioned it to suit his mind. Every evening, just at this after-supper hour, he stood still for a time to admire it, as he was doing now.

Having quaffed his customary draught of delight from the picture before him Caleb resumed his walk to the store, pausing at its door to straighten into place the long bench kept there for the accommodation of visiting customers. As he swung the bench against the wall he bent and peered closely at two sets of newly-carved initials on its smooth surface.

"W. W." he read, and frowned. "By ding! That's that Billy Wilson. Now let's see, 'A. S.' I wonder who them initials stand fer?" With a shake of his grizzled mop he entered the store.

A slim girl in a gingham dress stood in front of the counter placing parcels in a basket. She turned a flushed face, lit with brown roguish eyes, on Caleb, as he came in.

"Had your supper, Pa?" she asked.

"Yep." Caleb bent and scrutinized the basket.

"Whose parcels are them, Ann?" he questioned.

"Mrs. Keeler's," his daughter answered. "Billy Wilson left the order."

"Hump, he did, eh? Well, let's see the slip." He took the piece of paper from the counter and read:

One box fruit-crackers.
10 pounds granulated sugar.
Two pounds cheese.
1 pound raisins.
1 pound lemon peel.
4 cans salmon.
50 sticks hoarhound candy.

There were other items but Caleb read no further. He stood back sucking the stem of his pipe thoughtfully. "Whereabouts did that Billy go, Ann?" he asked at length.

"Why, he didn't go. He's in the liquor-shop settin' a trap for that rat, Pa."

"Oh he is, eh? Well, tell him to come out here; I want to see him."

Caleb waited until his daughter turned to execute his order, then the frown melted from his face and a wide grin took its place. "The young reprobate," he muttered. "What'll that boy be up to next, I wonder? I've got t' teach him a lesson, ding me! if I haven't. It's clear enough t' me that him and that young Keeler are shapin' fer a little excursion, up bush, and this is the way they take to get their fodder."

He turned slowly as his daughter and Billy entered from the rear of the shop and let his eyes rest on the boy's face. "How are you, Billy?" he asked genially.

"I'm well, thanks," and Billy gazed innocently back into Caleb's eyes. "I hope your rheumatiz is better, Mr. Spencer."

"It is," said Caleb shortly, "and my eyes are gettin' sharper every day, Billy."

"That's good," said Billy and bent to pick up the basket.

"Jest a minute, young man." Caleb's voice was stern. "I see you've cut your own and your best gal's initials onto my new bench. Did you have much trouble doin' it, might I ask?"

Billy stood up, a grin on his face. "That pine bench looked so invitin' I jest couldn't help tryin' my new knife on it," he explained. "But I didn't s'pose fer a minute that you'd mind."

"Well, by ding! I don't know but what I *do* mind. What if you should take a notion, some day, to carve up the side of this buildin', hey?"

Billy grew thoughtful. "I hadn't thought o' that," he said slowly. "It's pine, too, ain't it? It 'ud carve fine."

Caleb turned quickly towards a pile of goods, behind which an audible titter had sounded.

"Ann," he commanded, "you run along and get your supper."

He waited until his daughter had closed the door behind her. "Now Billy," he said, sternly, "understan' me when I say that if you ever so much as lay a knife-blade onto the walls of this here store I'll jest naturally pinch the freckles off'n your nose, one by one. Hear that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, heed it, and heed it close. I'll overlook the cuttin' of my new bench, but, by ding! I'd ruther you'd carve me than carve this store." He paused abruptly and

bent on Billy a quizzical look. "Whose 'nitals are them under yourn?" he asked.

Billy started. "Oh gosh! I dunno, Mr. Spencer; I jest cut the first ones come into my head."

"Umph! I'm not so green as I look. I know whose they be. They're Ann's."

Billy was silent. Should he tell the truth and say that he had carved Ann's initials on the bench and those of Walter Watland beneath them at that young lady's pleading request? No!

"Well?" Caleb asked finally. "What about it?"

Billy drew himself up and lied like a gentleman. "I guess that's all there is about it," he said with dignity. "Ann's my girl, an' she said I could cut my 'nitals under hers if I wanted to take the chance."

"Oh, so she's your gal, is she?" Caleb thrust his hands deep into his pockets, striving hard to keep his face stern. "How long you and Ann been sweetheartin'?" he asked.

"Five er six years; maybe longer."

"Loramighty!" Caleb sank weakly on a pile of horse-blankets, and gasped. "But, Billy, she's only twelve now, and you—you can't be much more'n fourteen at most."

"I'm growin' fifteen," said Billy gravely. "Me an' Ann's been goin' together fer quite a long spell."

Caleb placed his empty pipe in one pocket, fished in another and drew out a plug of Radiant Star chewing tobacco. He took a generous bite from one corner of the plug and champed it meditatively.

"Well, Billy," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "seein's we're to be right close related, some day, I guess it's up to me to give you your supper. You go right along over to the house and eat with Ann."

"But I'm not hungry, Mr. Spencer," said Billy quickly.

“ That don’t make no difference; you go along. I see Ann’s made a mistake in doin’ up Mrs. Keeler’s parcels. You can’t go back for a bit, anyways, so you might as well have your supper.”

Billy went out and Spencer watched him cross the road and enter the cottage. “ Well, now,” he chuckled, “ ain’t that boy a tartar? But,” he added, “ he’s got to be slicker than he is to fool old Caleb. Now, you jest watch me.”

He lifted the basket to the counter and, taking the parcels from it, carefully emptied their contents back into the drawers from which they had been filled. Then from beneath the counter he drew out a box and with exquisite pains filled each of the empty bags and the cracker-box with sawdust. He tied the bags, packed them in the basket, tucked a roll of tea lead in the bottom, to give the basket weight, and placed it on the counter. Then he went outside to sit on the bench and await Billy’s return.

Caleb had come to Scotia Settlement when it was little more than a bald spot on the pate of the hardwoods. Gypsy-like he had strayed into the settlement and, to use his own vernacular, had pitched his wigwam to stay. One month later a snug log cabin stood on the wooded hillside overlooking the valley, and the sound of Caleb’s axe could be heard all day long, as he cleared a garden spot in the forest. That forest ran almost to the white sands of Lake Erie, pausing a quarter of a mile from its shore as though fearing to advance further. On this narrow strip of land the pines and cedars had taken their stand, as if in defiance of the more rugged trees of the upland. They grew close together in thickets so dense that beneath them, even on the brightest day, blue-white twilight rested always. Running westward, these coniferous trees grew bolder and widened so as to almost cover the broad finger-like point

of land which separated Rond Eau Bay from Lake Erie, and thither many of the wild things crept, as civilization advanced to claim their old roaming grounds. The point, known as Point Aux Pines, was ten miles long, affording abundance of food and perfect shelter.

But on the uplands the forests grew sparser as the axes of rugged homesteaders, who had followed in the footsteps of Caleb Spencer, bit home. Gradually farms were cleared, rough stumpy fields the tilling of which tested the hearts of the strongest, but whose rich soil gladdened even the most weary. A saw mill was erected on the banks of a stream known as Levee Creek. Gradually the rough log cabins of the settlers were torn down to be replaced by more modern houses of lumber.

And then Caleb Spencer had built his store and with far-seeing judgment had stocked it with nearly every variety of goods a growing community needs. Drygoods, Groceries, Hardware & Liquors! These comprehensive words, painted on a huge sign, stared out at all who passed along the road and in still more glaring letters beneath was the announcement, "Caleb Spencer, Proprietor."

Everybody liked Caleb. Even old man Scroggie had been fond of him, when he was saying a great deal. It was said the old miser even trusted the gaunt storekeeper to a certain degree. At any rate it was commonly known that shortly before he died Scroggie had given into Spencer's keeping, to be locked away in his rusty old store safe, a certain legal-looking document. Deacon Ringold and Cobin Keeler had witnessed the transaction. Accordingly, after Scroggie was buried and a search for the will failed to disclose it, it was perhaps natural that a delegation of neighbors should wait on Caleb and question him concerning the paper which the deceased man had given him. To

everybody's surprise Caleb had flared up and told the delegation that the paper in question was the consummation of a private matter between himself and the dead man, and that he didn't have to show it and didn't intend to show it.

Of course that settled it. The delegation apologized, and Caleb tapped a keg of cider and opened a box of choice biscuits just to show that there were no hard feelings. Now this in itself was surely indisputable proof of the confidence his neighbors reposed in Caleb's veracity and honesty, but considering the fact that Caleb had once quarrelled with the elder Stanhope, later refusing all overtures of friendship from the latter, and had even gone so far as to cherish the same feeling of animosity toward the son, Frank, that trust was little short of sublime. For, providing Caleb disliked Frank Stanhope—and he did and made no attempt to hide it—what would be more natural than that he should keep him from his rightful inheritance if he could?

But nobody mistrusted Caleb, Frank Stanhope least of all; and so, for the time being, the incident of the legal document was forgotten.

Tonight, as Caleb sat outside on the bench waiting for the first evening customers to arrive, he reviewed the pleasant years of his life in this restful spot and was satisfied. Suddenly he sat erect. From the edge of a walnut grove on the far side of the road came a low warble, sweet as the song of a wild bird, but with a minor note of sadness in its lilting.

"That's old Harry and his tin whistle," muttered Caleb, "Glory be! but can't he jest make that thing sing?"

Softly the last note died, and then the player emerged from the grove. He was little and bent. He wore a ragged suit of corduroys and a battered felt hat with a red feather

stuck jauntily in its band. His face was small, dark, and unshaven. In one grimy hand he carried a small demijohn. Arriving opposite Caleb, he lifted his battered hat and bowed low as a courtier would do.

"Glory be! It's find ye alone I do," he spoke in rich Irish brogue. "It's trill ye a chune I did from the copse, yonder, so's to soften the hard heart of ye, Caleb. It's dhry I am as a last-year's chip, an' me little jug do be pinin' fer a refillin'."

Caleb's face grew stern. "I told you, Harry O'Dule, that I'd give you no more liquor," he replied.

"Faith, maybe ye did. But last night it's the skies thimselves said 'rain,' an' begorry! there's been not a sign av a shower t'day. What matters ut fer the fallin' av an idle wurrud now and thin? It's meself knows you're too tinder hearted t' refuse a small favor to a body that feels only love an' respect fer yourself an' the swate ones who wait ye in the flower-covered cottage, beyont."

"Stop your blarney, Harry. I tell you I'll give you no more whisky, and by ding! that goes!"

"Thin I'll be trudgin' back along the way," said O'Dule, hopelessly. "But afore I go, I'll be liltin' ye a small chune that'll mebee make ye understand somethin' av a sadness yer generosity could lessen. Listen thin!"

He set the jug down, and from his bosom drew forth a tin whistle. For a minute or two he played softly, his eyes on Caleb's. Then, gradually, his eyes closed and a rapt expression settled upon his grimy face as he led his listener down strange by-paths of fancy.

Suddenly, Caleb jumped from the bench. "Stop, Harry O'Dule!" he entreated. "That whistle of yours would soften the heart of old Nick himself. Do you want to set me crazy, man? Come, give me your jug, I'll fill it this

time. But remember, never ag'in. I mean that, by ding! "

He snatched up the demijohn and went into the store. Old Harry sat down on the bench and waited until he returned.

" It's a good fri'nd ye've been t' me, Caleb," he said gratefully, as he lifted the jug and held it between his knees. " It's do widout me dhrink I cannot. Ut an' me whistle are me only gleams av sunlight in the gloom. I'll be after takin' a little flash of the light now, if ut's no objection ye have, for ut's long dhry I've been." He lifted the jug and took a long draught of its fiery contents.

" I'll be movin' now," he said, as he wiped his mouth on a tattered sleeve. " God kape you safe, Caleb Spencer, an' may yer whisky-barrel niver run dhry."

And placing his battered hat jauntily on his scanty locks, Harry picked up his jug and was lost amid the shadows.

Presently Billy Wilson emerged from the cottage, received his basket from Caleb, and trotted off toward the Keeler place.

CHAPTER VI

THE RUSE THAT FAILED

Out behind the wood-shed Maurice Keeler, by the dim light of a smoky lantern, was splitting kindling for the morning's fire when something clammy and twisting dropped across the back of his neck.

"Holy Smoke! Bill, take it away!" he yelled, as his chum's laugh fell on his ears.

"Gosh! you ain't got no nerve a'tall, Maurice! It's only a milk-snake. I picked it up on my way home from the store. I'm goin' to put it in the menagerie."

Maurice sat down weakly on a block and wiped his face on his sleeve.

"Hang it all, Bill!" he complained, "what do you see in snakes to make you want'a handle 'em so? I'm scared to death of 'em; I own it."

"I s'pose this feller an' ol' Spotba 'll fight to a finish," said Billy, "but I aim to keep one snake of each kind, so let 'em scrap it out. It won't hurt that old womper to get a good drubbin' anyway."

He held the newly captured snake along his arm, its head resting in the palm of his hand. The dim light was sufficiently strong for Maurice to note the cold gleam in its eyes, and he chuddered. "Some day you'll try your monkey-shines on a puff-adder er a black-snake," he prophesied, "an' then you'll wish you hadn't gone clean crazy."

Billy grinned and dropped the snake into his jacket pocket. "I brought your Ma's groceries," he said. "Is she in the house?"

"Yep; she's cannin' thimble-berries. Jest wait till I get an armful of kindlin', an' I'll go in with you."

Billy put the basket down again. "Say, what did she want with all that hoarhound candy?" he asked curiously.

Maurice chuckled. "Why, Missis Spencer told her what great stuff it was to use in doin' up thimble-berries; sorta takes the flat taste off 'em. So Ma, she's goin' to try it."

Billy whistled. "But fifty sticks, Maurice! It's almost more'n she'll need, don't you think?"

"'Course it's a lot too much. S'pose we try on' get hold of some of it, Bill?"

"Suits me," agreed Billy, "but jest how? That's the question."

Maurice stooped and filled his arms with a load of kindling. "I dunno how," he replied, "but you usually find out a way fer everythin'. What's the matter with you lettin' on you lost part of that candy?"

Billy shook his head. "No good, she'd be onto us bigger'n a barn. Tell you what we might do. We might take bad colds an' sorta work on her sympathies."

"Humph! an' be kept close in the house fer a week er so, an' have to take physic an' stuff. No good, Bill!"

"No, ours won't be them kind of colds," Billy explained. "They'll be the dry-cough, consumption kind, that either cure up quick er slow. All we gotta do is dig up an Injun turnip out o' the bush an' nibble it. It'll pucker our throats up so tight we'll be hoarse enough to sing bass in the choir."

Maurice let his kindling fall. "Gee!" he exclaimed, "I've got a piece of Injun turnip in my pocket right now. Ain't that lucky!"

"How'd you come to have it?"

"Dug it up to fool Fatty Watland with. Was goin' to

tell him it was a ground-nut. I've had it in fer him ever since he shoved me off the bridge into the creek."

"Let's have it."

Billy took the Indian turnip from his chum and with his knife scraped off a portion of white, pungent pulp. "Now then, put this on the back of your tongue, an' leave it there," he directed.

Maurice grimaced as he licked the bit of pulp from the knife blade. "'Course we both know this danged thing is pisin," he said, uncertainly. "Maybe we're fools, Bill?"

"There's no maybe about it, far's you're concerned. Do as I tell you; slide it 'way back so's it'll tighten your throat. That's right," as Maurice heroically obeyed. "Now, let's get up to the house."

"But you haven't took yourn!" cried Maurice.

"Don't need to take mine," Billy informed him. "What's the use of me takin' any; ain't one bad cough enough?"

Maurice squirmed in torture. Already the burning wild turnip was getting in its work. His throat felt as though it were filled with porcupine quills. He tried to voice a protest against the injustice Billy had done him but it ended in a wheeze.

"Fine," commended Billy. "A cold like that oughta be good fer half the hoarhound, anyway. Let's go in afore the thing wears off. You take the basket, I'll carry the kindlin' fer you."

He led the way to the house, Maurice following meekly with the market-basket, eyes running tears and throat burning.

Mrs. Keeler was bending over a kettle on the stove, from which the aroma of wild thimble-berries came in fragrant puffs.

"So you're back at last, are you?" she addressed Billy, crossly. "Thought you'd never come. I've been waitin' on that sugar an' stuff fer two hours er more. Now, you go into the pantry and get somethin' to eat, while I unpack this basket. I know you must be nigh starved."

"Had my supper," shouted Billy. He threw the kindling into the wood box and grinned encouragement at Maurice, who had sunk miserably down on a stool.

Mrs. Keeler lifted the basket which Maurice had placed on the floor at his feet. "What's the matter with you?" she asked, giving him a shake.

Maurice looked up at her with tear-filled eyes, and tried to say something. The effort was vain; not a sound issued from his swollen lips. Billy promptly advanced to give first aid.

"Maurice's sick," he shouted in the deaf woman's ear.

"Sick? Where's he sick?" Mrs. Keeler lifted the basket to the table and coming back to Maurice, put a berry-stained finger under his chin. "Stick out your tongue!" she commanded. "Billy, you fetch that lamp over here."

Maurice opened his mouth and protruded his stained and swollen tongue.

"Good gracious!" cried the mother, in alarm. "That good fer nuthin' boy has gone an' caught the foot an' mouth disease from Kearnie's sheep."

"It's jest a bad cold he's caught," Billy reassured her. "He's so hoarse he can't speak."

"Well, it might as well be one thing as another," frowned the woman. "That boy catches everythin' that comes along, anyway. I s'pose I'll have to quit my preservin' to mix him up a dose of allaways."

Maurice shivered and gazed imploringly at Billy.

"If you had somethin' sweet an' soothin' to give him," Billy suggested. "Pine syrup, er hoarhound, er somethin' like that, now —"

"Why, maybe you're right," agreed Mrs. Keeler, "an' I do declare! I've got some hoarhound right here in this basket. Ain't it lucky I sent fer it?"

The boys exchanged glances. The scheme was working! Mrs. Keeler went back to the basket on the table and started to remove the packages, one by one.

Billy addressed his chum in tones so low the deaf woman could not hear. "Now, maybe you'll think I know what I'm doin'," he commenced, then jumped guiltily, as a cry of indignation came from the other side of the room. Mrs. Keeler was untying the parcels, one after another, and emptying their contents in the basket. Billy stared. Each of the parcels contained — *sawdust*.

She turned slowly, stern eyes looking above her glasses straight into his startled and apprehensive ones.

"Well?" she said ominously, "I s'pose you think you've played a smart trick, you young limb!"

Billy tried to say something. His lips moved dumbly. Moisture gathered between his shoulder blades, condensed as it met cold fear, and trickled in tiny rivulets down his shivering spine.

He glanced at the door. Mrs. Keeler's square form interposed itself staunchly between him and that means of exit. His wild eyes strayed to the face of his chum. Maurice was grinning a glad, if swollen, grin. There was nothing to do but face the music.

Mrs. Keeler was advancing towards him now; advancing slowly like some massed avenging force of doom. "I didn't do that," he finally managed to articulate. "I didn't play no trick on you, Missus Keeler."

His knees knocked together. Unconsciously, his hand felt gropingly back toward the wood-box in search of some kind of support. Mrs. Keeler's deafness was accountable for her misunderstanding of his words. She brought her advance to a halt and stood panting.

"I didn't play no trick on you," Billy repeated.

"I heard you the first time," panted the indignant woman. "You said if I teched you you'd *take a stick to me*. So you'd commit murder on a woman who has been a second mother to you, would you! You'd brain me with a stick out of that wood-box! Oh! Oh!" She lifted her apron and covered her face.

In a moment Billy was beside her. "Oh Missus Keeler," he pleaded, miserably. "I didn't say that. Don't think I'd do anythin' to hurt you, 'cause I wouldn't. An' I wouldn't play no dirty trick on you. You've been good to me an' I think a heap o' you, even if you do cuff me sometimes. Mr. Spencer put up that basket himself while I was over to the cottage, gittin' my supper."

Slowly the apron was lowered. Slowly the woman's hands dropped to Billy's shoulders and she gazed into his uplifted eyes. Then she did a thing which was quite characteristic of her. She bent and gave each of the wide grey eyes upraised to hers a resounding kiss. Then, roughly pushing him away, she reached for her shawl and hat hanging on the wall.

"You boys stay right here and keep fire under that kettle," she commanded. "I'm goin' to take that old Caleb Spencer's sawdust back to him an' give him a piece of my mind." And picking up the basket she went out, banging the door behind her.

The boys gazed at each other and Maurice's chuckle echoed Billy's, although it was raspy and hoarse.

"Throat burnin' yet?" inquired Billy.

"You bet," Maurice managed to answer.

"Well, you go along to the milkhouse an' lick the cream off a pan of milk. It'll settle that Injun turnip quick."

Maurice scooted for the back door. He returned in a little while with white patches of cream adhering to chin and nose. "Gosh!" he sighed gratefully, "that was soothin'."

"What dye s'pose made Caleb Spencer put up that job on me?" questioned Billy. "I never fooled him any. I did cut some letters on his new bench, but he needn't feel so sore at that."

"Well, jest you wait till Ma asks him why he did it," laughed Maurice, who now was almost normal again. "Ma's great on gettin' explanations, she is."

Billy went down into his pocket and drew forth a furry object about the size of a pocket knife and held it under his chum's eyes.

"Gollies!" exclaimed Maurice. "It's your rabbit-foot charm. Where d'you find it, Bill?"

"Found it this mornin' down by the pine grove near old Scroggie's ha'nted house. Stood on this side of the creek an' sent ol' Moll into the grove. She brought it to me. She's a great little dog, Moll. Now we're ready to hunt ol' Scroggie's buried money an' lost will."

"What! Tonight?"

"Sure. Do you want somebody else to stumble on it first? We've gotta hunt tonight an' every night till we find it, that's all."

"But we can't go now. I dassent leave them preserves. If I do Ma'll skin me. Anyways, ain't we goin' to let Elgin an' Fatty in on it, Bill?"

"Naw, you know what they'd do. They'd let the cat

out o' the bag sure. They're all right fer light work sech as swipin' watermelon an' helpin' make a seine-haul but they ain't no good at treasure an' will huntin'."

"Maybe you're right," Maurice said, "but I'm goin' t' tell you I ain't feelin' any too much like prowlin' 'round that ha'nted house this night er any other night."

Billy pushed his friend into a chair and stood before him. "Now look here, Scarecat," he said, "you're goin' to help me find that money an' will, an' I'll tell you why. You know what happened to Mr. Stanhope, the teacher, don't you? He's gone blind an' has had to give up teachin' the school, hasn't he?"

Maurice nodded, his face grave.

"Well, what kind of a feller is he, anyway? Come, answer up."

"He's a mighty fine feller," cried Maurice enthusiastically.

"You're right, he is. Well, what's he goin' to do now? He can't work, kin he?"

"Gollies, no. I never thought —"

"Well, it's time you did think. Now you know that ol' Scroggie left him everythin' he owned, don't you?"

"'Course I do."

"Only he can't prove it, kin he?"

"No! Not without the will."

"Well, then?" Billy sat down on a corner of the table and eyed his friend reproachfully.

Maurice squirmed uneasily, then he said: "'Course, Bill, it's up to you an' me to find that will. But I'll be shot if I'd do what we'll have to do fer anybody else in the world but him."

"Say, here's a piece of news fer you," cried Billy. "We're goin' to get ol' Harry O'Dule to help us. He's

the seventh son of a seventh son. We're goin' over to his cabin to see him tonight."

"Gee! Bill, we oughta find it if we get Harry to help, but I can't see how I'm goin' to get away," said Maurice ruefully.

Just here a step sounded on the gravel outside and a knock fell on the door. Maurice opened the door and in stepped Anson.

He glanced suspiciously from one to the other of the boys, then said: "Ma sent me to see what happened to you, Bill. She says come on home to your supper."

"Had my supper," Billy informed him. "You go on back and tell Ma that."

"You've gotta come, too."

"No, Anse, I promised Missus Keeler that me an' Maurice would keep fire under that preservin' kettle till she gits back from the store. I need the ten cents to buy fish hooks with, besides —"

"Gee! Bill, is she goin' to give you ten cents fer helpin' Maurice keep fire on?" asked Anson eagerly.

"Well, she didn't 'zactly promise she would, but —"

"Say, fellers, let me stay with you an' we'll split three ways, eh?" suggested Anson.

"No," said Billy, with finality.

"'Tain't enough fer a three-way split," said Maurice.

"Well, you can't hinder me from stayin', an' I figger I'm in fer a third," said Anson, seating himself doggedly near the stove.

Billy's face cracked into a grin which he was careful to turn from his step-brother. "How'd you like to do all the firin' an' get all the reward, Anse?" he suggested. "I've got a milk-snake here that I want'a get put safe away in the root-house afore Ma takes in the lantern."

Maurice 'll come along an' help me stow him away."

"All right, I'll stay an' fire," agreed Anson. "But remember," as the other boys reached for their hats, "I ain't agoin' to share up what Missus Keeler gives me with you fellers."

"You're welcome to keep all she gives you fer yourself," said Billy.

"Sure," said Maurice. "She'll likely hold somethin' back fer me, anyway. Don't ferget to keep a good fire on, Anse," he admonished, as he followed Billy outside.

CHAPTER VII

THE RABBIT FOOT CHARM

The place which old Harry O'Dule called home was a crumbling log cabin on the shore of Levee Creek, just on the border of the Scroggie bush. Originally it had been built as a shelter for sheep, but with the clearing of the land it had fallen into disuse. O'Dule had found it on one of his pilgrimages and had promptly appropriated it unto himself. Nobody thought of disputing his possession, perhaps because most of the good people of Scotia inwardly feared the old man's uncanny powers of second sight, and the foreshadowing — on those who chose to cross him — of dire evils, some of which had been known to materialize. Old Harry boasted that he was the seventh son of a seventh son.

"It's born under a caul was I," he told them. "An' minny a mystery has been cleared up in ould Ireland be meself, I'm tellin' ye."

At which some laughed and some scoffed. Deacon Ringold had sternly advised the old man to return to the country where black magic was still countenanced, as there was no place for it in an enlightened and Christian community such as Scotia, a suggestion that old Harry took in seeming good humor. But the fact that the deacon lost two milk cows and four hogs, through sickness during the fortnight which followed, had caused considerable discussion throughout the settlement.

O'Dule had cut a window in the cabin, installed an old stove, table and chairs, and succeeded in making the place

home-like enough to suit his simple taste. To-night he stood by the stove, frying potatoes and humming an Irish song. On the table lay a loaf of bread and some butter in a saucer, while close beside it a coal oil lamp gave a smoky light to the room. In the center of the table reposed a huge blue-grey cat, its amber eyes on Harry and its fore-paws curled contentedly beneath its furry breast. All about the room hung the skins of wild animals—deer, bear, lynx and coon. A pile of skins lay in one corner. This was O'Dule's bed.

“Och! Billy O'Shune can't ye whistle t' me,
Av the gurril ye loved on the Isle 'cross the sea—
Shure it's weary I am av that drear, sorry song
So stop liltin', through tears, wid a visage so long—
Come, it's me ears a glad ditty would hear—
Av love 'neath th' skies av ould Ireland, dear—
Come, let us be glad—both together, me lad—
There's good fish in the sea as has iver been had—
—Och, Billy O'Shune—
That's not much av a chune.”

So hummed old Harry as he stirred the potatoes and wet his vocal chords, occasionally, from the jug at his feet.

Suddenly a knock fell on the door.

“In ye come,” invited the Irishman and there entered Billy and Maurice.

“Sit ye down, lads, sit ye down,” cried the hospitable Harry. “Begobs, but it's a fine brace av byes ye are, an' no mistake. Wull ye be afther suppin' a bit wid me? The repast is all but spread an' it's full welcome ye are, both.”

“We've had our supper,” said Billy. “Thought we'd like to see you fer a minute er two, Harry,” he added gravely, as he and his chum seated themselves.

"Alone," said Maurice, significantly.

"Faith an' ain't I alone enough to suit ye?" laughed Harry. "Would ye have me put the cat out, thin? Now, phwat is ut?"

The boys glanced at each other. "You tell him," whispered Billy, but Maurice shook his head. "No, you," he whispered back.

Billy braced himself and took a long breath. "We've made up our minds t' find old man Scroggie's will," he said.

"An' money," said Maurice. "We want you to help us, Harry."

"God love us!" ejaculated Harry, dropping the knife with which he was stirring the potatoes and reaching for the demijohn. "An' fer why should ye be out on that wild goose chase, now?"

"'Cause we want Teacher Stanhope to have what belongs to him," said Billy warmly.

"Do ye now? God love him but that was a hard slap in th' face he got fer playin' the man's part, so ut was. Only this night did I say as much to Caleb Spencer. Ut's meself would like t' see him get what was his by rights, byes."

"We knew that," cried Billy, eagerly; "that's why we come to you, Harry. You say you've found buried treasure in Ireland; won't you help us find the lost will an' money?"

O'Dule transferred the potatoes from the frying pan to a cracked plate. He sat down at the table and ate his supper without so much as another word. The boys watched him, fear in their hearts that the eccentric old Irishman would refuse their request.

After a time Harry pushed his stool back from the table.

"Byes," he said, producing a short black pipe from his pocket. "It's lend ye a spade and lantern I'll do an' gladly; but it's yerselves would surely not be axin' me t' test me powers ag'in a spirrut. Listen now. Old Scroggie's ghost do be guardin' his money, wheriver it lies. That you know as well as me. It's frank I'll be wid ye, an' tell ye that ag'in spirruts me powers are as nuthin'. An' go widin the unholy circle av the ha'nted grove to do favor t' aither man 'er divil I'll not."

"But think of what it means to him," urged Billy. "Besides, Harry, I've got a charm that'll keep ol' Scroggie's ghost away," he added, eagerly.

"An' phwat is ut?" Old Harry's interest was real. He laid his pipe down on the table and leaned towards Billy.

"It's the left hind foot of a grave-yard rabbit," said Billy, proudly exhibiting the charm.

O'Dule's shaggy brows met in a frown. "Ut's no good a'tall, a'tall," he said, contemptuously. "Ut's not aven a snake-bite that trinket wud save ye from, let alone a ghost."

Billy felt his back-bone stiffen in resentment. Then he noted that the milk snake, which he had thought snugly asleep in his coat pocket, had awakened in the warmth of the little cabin and slipped from the pocket and now lay, coiled and happy, beneath the rusty stove. He saw his opportunity to get back at O'Dule for his scoffing.

"All right, Harry," he said airily, "if that's all you know about charms, I guess you haven't any that 'ud help us much. But let me tell you that rabbit-foot charm kin do wonders. It'll not only keep you from bein' bit by snakes but by sayin' certain words to it you kin bring a snake right in to your feet with it, an' you kin pick it up an' handle it without bein' bit, too."

"Och, it's a brave lad ye are, Billy bye," Harry wheezed, "an' a brave liar, too. Go on wid yer nonsense, now."

"It's a fact, Harry," backed Maurice.

"Fact," cried O'Dule, angrily now. "Don't ye be comin' to me, a siventh son av a siventh son, wid such non-sinse. Faith, if yon worthless rabbit-fut kin do phwat ye claim, why not prove ut t' me now?"

"An' if we do," asked Billy eagerly, "will you agree to use your power to help us find the money an' will?"

"That I'll do," assented Harry, unhesitatingly. "Call up yer snake an' handle ut widout bein' bit, an' I'll help ye."

"All right, I'll do it," said Billy. "Jest turn the lamp down a little, Harry."

"Me hands are a bit unsteady," said Harry, quickly. "We'll l'ave the light be as ut is, Billy."

"It ought'a be dark," protested Billy, "but I'll try it anyway." He lifted the rabbit foot to his face and breathed some words upon it. Then in measured tones he recited:

"Hokey-pokey Bamboo Brake —
Go an' gather in a snake —"

Slowly Billy lowered the charm and looked at Harry. The old man sat, puffing his short pipe, a derisive grin on his unshaven lips.

"It's failed ye have, as I knowed ye wud," he chuckled. "Ye best be lavin' now, both av ye, wid yer pranks."

"But," said Billy quickly, "the charm did work. It brought the snake, jest as I said it would."

"Brought ut? Where is ut, thin?" Harry sat up straight, his little eyes flashing in fright.

“ It’s under the stove. See it? ”

Harry bent and peered beneath the stove. “ Be the scales av the divil! ” he shivered, “ is ut a big, mottled snake I see, or have I got what always I feared I might get some day. Is ut the D. T.’s I’ve got, I wonder? How come the reptile here, anyhow, byes? ”

“ You told me to bring it in, didn’t you? ” Billy inquired, mildly.

“ Yis, yis, Billy. But hivins! ut’s little did I think that eat-paw av a charm had such power,” groaned the wretched Irishman. “ Ut’s yourself said ut would let you handle reptiles widout bein’ bit. Thin fer the love ov hivin pluck yon serpent from beneath the stove an’ hurl ut outside into the blackness where ut belongs.”

Billy arose and moving softly to the stove picked up the harmless milk snake, squirming and protesting, from the warm floor. O’Dule watched him with fascinated eyes. The big cat had risen and with back fur and tail afluff spit vindictively as Billy passed out through the door.

When he returned O’Dule was seated on the edge of the table, his feet on a stool. He was taking a long sup from the demijohn.

“ Well, do you believe in my charm now? ” Billy asked.

“ I do,” said Harry unhesitatingly.

“ An’ you’ll help us, as you promised? ”

“ Did ye iver hear av Harry O’Dule goin’ back on a promise? ” said the old man, reproachfully. “ Help you wull I shurely, an’ I’ll be tellin’ ye how. Go ye over t’ the corner, Billy, an’ pull up the loose board av the flure. Ye’ll be findin’ a box there. Yis, that’s right. Now fetch ut here. Look ye both, byes.”

Harry lifted the little tin box to his knees and opened it. From it he brought forth a conglomeration of articles.

There were queer little disks of hammered brass and copper, an egg-shaped object that sparkled like crystal in the lamp-light, a crotch-shaped branch of a tree. As he handled those objects tenderly the old man's face was tense and he mumbled something entirely meaningless to the watchers. Finally, with an exclamation of triumph, he brought forth a piece of metal the size and shape of an ordinary lead pencil.

"Look ye," he cried, holding it aloft. "The fairies' magic arrer, ut is, an' ut niver fails t' fall on the spot where the treasure lies hidden. Foind Scroggie's buried money ut would have long ago if ut wasn't fer the ould man's spirrut that roams the grove. As I told ye afore, ut's no charm ag'in the spirruts av the departed, as yon grave-yard rabbit's fut is."

"But with the two of 'em," cried Billy eagerly, "we kin surely find the will, Harry."

"It's right true ye spake," nodded Harry. "An' mebbe sooner than we think. An' ut's the young t'acher wid the blindness that gets it all, ye say?"

"Ol' Scroggie left it all to him," said Billy.

"Begobs, so I've heard before." Harry scratched his head reflectively.

"Well, God love his gentle heart, ut's himself now'll hardly be carin' phwat becomes o' the money, let alone he gets possession av the thousand acre hardwoods, I'm thinkin'," he said, fastening his eyes on Billy's face. "I'd be wishin' the young t'acher to be ginerous, byes."

"He will," cried Billy, "I know he will."

"Thin God bless him," cried Harry. "Now grasp tight t' yer rabbit fut, an' we'll be afther goin' on our way t' tempt Satan, over beyant in the evil cedars."

Five minutes later the trio were out on the forest path,

passing in Indian file towards the haunted grove. The wind had risen and now swept through the great trees with ghostly sound. A black cloud, creeping up out of the west, was wiping out the stars. Throughout the forest the notes of the night-prowlers were strangely hushed. No word was spoken between the treasure-seekers until the elm-bridged creek was reached. Then old Harry paused, with labored breath, his head bent as though listening.

“Hist,” he whispered and Billy and Maurice felt their flesh creep. “Ut’s hear that swishin’ av feet above, ye do? Ut’s the Black troupe houldin’ their course ’twixt the scared earth an’ the storm. The witches of Ballyclue, ut is, an’ whin they be out on their mad run the ghosts av dead min hould wild carnival. Ut’ll be needin’ that rabbit-fut sure we wull, if the ha’nted grove we enter this night.”

CHAPTER VIII

LUCK RIDES THE STORM

Beneath the shadow of the coming storm the forest gloom deepened to velvet blackness. Suddenly a tongue of lightning licked the tree-tops and a crash of thunder shattered the stillness. A few heavy rain-drops spattered on the branches above the heads of the waiting three. Billy and Maurice, a strange terror tugging at their heart-strings, waited for old Harry to give the word forward. But Harry seemed to be in no great hurry to voice such command. Fear had gripped his superstitious soul and the courage loaned him from the squat demijohn was fast oozing away.

Above, the blue-white lightning zig-zagged and the boom of the thunder shook the earth. A huge elm shivered and shrieked as if in agony as a darting tongue of flame enwrapped it like a yellow serpent, splitting its heart in twain.

Billy found himself, face down, on the wet moss. Maurice was tugging at his arm. The stricken tree had burst into flame, beneath the ghostly light of which path, creek and pine-grove stood out clear-limned as a cameo against a velvet background. Billy noted this as he sat dazedly up. He and Maurice were alone; old Harry had vanished.

"He's gone," Maurice answered his chum's look. "Took to his heels when the lightnin' struck that elm. The shock knocked us both down. He was gone when I come to."

Billy grinned a wan grin and pressed his knuckles against his aching eyes. "So's my milk-snake," he said. "Guess I spilled him out o' my pocket when I fell. Gee! that was a close call. Say, Maurice, ain't it queer though? I was feelin' mighty scared an' trembly afore that bolt fell, but now I feel nervy enough to tackle any ghost. How 'bout you?"

"By gosh! that's jest how I feel, Bill. That lightnin' knocked all the scare plumb out o' me. I don't like these no-rain sort of thunderstorms though," he added. "They're always slashin' out when they're least expected."

"Well, the lightnin' part of this un's about past us, Maurice. But the rain's comin'. Guess that ol' elm's done fer. She's dead, though, else she wouldn't burn like that. By hokey!" he broke off, "will you look here?"

He picked up something that glittered in the firelight, and held it up for his chum's inspection.

"Old Harry's fairy arrer," gasped Maurice. "Oh say, Bill, ain't that lucky? He must have lost it in his scramble to get away."

"Likely. Now I move we go right over into that ha'nted grove. What you say?"

Maurice swallowed hard, "I'm blame fool enough fer anythin' since I got knocked silly by that bolt," he answered, "so I'm game if you are."

"Watch out!" warned Billy, grasping him by the arm and jerking him to one side, "that struck elm is goin' to fall." A rainbow of flame flashed close before the boys, as the stricken tree crashed across the path, hurling forth a shower of sparks as it came to earth. Then inky darkness followed and from the black canopy which

a moment ago had seemed to touch the tree tops the rain fell in torrents.

"Bill, Oh Bill! where 'bouts are you?" Maurice's voice sounded muffled and far away to his chum's ears

"I'm right here," he answered.

"Gollies! but ain't it dark? I can't see anythin' of you, Bill."

"Ner me, either. I guess we'll have to give up the hunt fer t'night, Maurice. Anyways, we don't know jest how to work ol' Harry's fairy arrer."

"No, we'll have to find out. Say, Bill, where 'bouts is the path?"

"Gee! how am I to know; it's right here somewheres, though."

"I guess I've found it, Bill. Come over close, so's I kin touch you, then we'll be movin' 'long. Hully gee! but I'm wet. Got both them charms safe?"

"Right here in my two fists, Maurice."

"Well, hang to 'em tight till we get away from this ha'nted grove. Ghosts don't mind rain none — an' *he's* liable t' be prowlin' out. Say, can't y' whistle a bit, so's it won't be so pesky lonesome?"

Billy puckered up his lips, but his effort was a failure. "You try, Maurice," he said, "I can't jest keep the hole in my mouth steady long enough t' whistle."

"Gosh! ain't I been tryin'," groaned Maurice. "My teeth won't keep still a'tall. Maybe I won't be one glad kid when we get out 'a here."

For half an hour they groped their way forward, no further words passing between them. The heavy roar of the rain on the tree tops made conversation next to impossible. The darkness was so dense they were forced to proceed slowly and pause for breath after bumping vio-

lently against a tree or sapling. They had been striving for what seemed to both to be a long, long time to find the clearing when Billy paused in his tracks and spoke: "It's no use, Maurice. We're lost."

Maurice sank weakly down against a tree trunk, and groaned.

"I guess we've struck into the big woods," Billy informed him. "Anyways, the trees are gettin' thicker the further we go."

"Gee! Bill, there might be wolves an' bears in this woods," said Maurice, fearfully.

"Sure there might but I guess all we kin do is take our chance with 'em."

"Well, I'd rather take a chance with a bear than a ghost, wouldn't you Bill?"

"Betcha, I would. Say Maurice," he broke out excitedly, "there's a light comin' through the trees. See it? It's movin'. Must be somebody with a lantern."

"I see it," Maurice replied in guarded tones. "Bill, that light's comin' this way, sure as shootin'."

"Looks like it. Wonder who it kin be? Maybe somebody lookin' fer us."

The two boys crouched down beside a great beech. The light, which had not been a great distance from them when first sighted, was rapidly approaching. Billy grasped his chum's arm. "Look," he whispered, "there's two of 'em."

"I see 'em," his friend whispered back. "Gosh! looks as though they're goin' to tramp right onto us."

However, the night-roamers of the forest did not walk into them. Instead they came very close to the boys and halted. The man who carried the lantern set it down on the ground and spoke in gruff tones to his companion, a

short, heavy-set man with a fringe of black beard on his face.

"I tell you, Jack, we'll hide the stuff there. It'll be safe as a church."

"I say no, Tom," the other returned, surlily. "It won't be safe there. Somebody'll be sure to find it."

The other man turned on him angrily. "Who'll find it?" he retorted. "Don't be a fool, Jack. You couldn't pull anybody to that place with a loggin' chain. It's the safest spot in the world to hide the stuff, I tell ye. Besides, the boat orter be in in a few days, and we kin slip the stuff to Cap. Jacques without the boss ever knowin' how far we've exceeded his orders."

"All right," gruffly assented his companion, "if you're so cock sure, it suits me all right. Come on; let's get out of this cussed woods. Remember we've got some work before us tonight."

The man named Tom picked up the lantern and moved on, cursing the rain and the saplings that whipped his face at every step. His pal followed without a word.

The boys waited until the lantern's glow grew hazy through the slackening rain, then they sprang up and followed. Three-quarters of an hour later the trees began to thin. Unwittingly the strangers had guided them into the clearing.

As they reached the open the rain ceased altogether. High above a few pale stars were beginning to probe through the tattered clouds. The men with the lantern were rapidly moving across the stumpy fallow, towards the causeway.

"Will we foller 'em, Bill?" asked Maurice eagerly.

Billy shook his head. "I'd sort o' like to," he said, slowly, "jest to find out what game they're up to, but I

guess if we know what's good fer us we'll go home an' take off these wet duds. Hard lookin' customers, wasn't they? "

" Hard, I should say so! I'll bet either one of 'em 'ud murder a hull family fer ten cents. Say, Bill, maybe they're pirates; you heard what they said about a boat, didn't you? "

" Yep, I heard, but they ain't pirates, 'cause they didn't have no tattoo marks on 'em, er rings in their ears; but whoever they are they're up to no good. They're aimin' to hide somethin' somewheres, but jest what it is an' where they intend hidin' it there's no way of tellin'; so come on, let's get movin'."

In silence they made their way across the clearing to the road. " Say, Bill," said Maurice, as they paused to rest on the top rail of the fence, " do you 'spose we best tell our dads about seein' them men? "

" Naw, can't you see if we told our dads that, they'd want 'a know what you an' me was doin' out in Scroggie's bush in the rain, at that hour of the night? No siree, we won't say a word 'bout it."

" Then s'posin' we try an' find out something 'bout 'em fer ourselves, eh? "

" Say, you give me a pain," cried Billy. " Don't you 'spose we've got all we kin do ahead of us now? "

" Findin' Scroggie's money an' will, you mean? "

" Sure. Now shut up an' let's get home. I expect Ma'll be waitin' up to give me hail Columbia, an' I guess you won't be gettin' any pettin' from yourn, either."

" I know what I'll be gettin' from mine, all right," said Maurice, moodily. " Say, Bill," he coaxed, " you come along over by our place an' smooth things over fer me, will you? You kin do anythin' with Ma."

"No," said Billy, "I got to be movin' on."

"But I'll get an awful hidin' if you don't. I don't mind an ordinary tannin' but a tannin' in these wet pants is goin' to hurt like fury. They're stickin close to my legs. I might as well be naked an' Ma she certainly does lay it on."

Billy laughed. "All right, I'll come along, but I ain't believin' anythin' I kin say to your Ma'll keep you from gettin' it."

The boys slid from the fence, then leaped back as something long and white rose from behind a fallen tree and, with a startled snort, confronted them.

"Gollies!" ejaculated Billy. "It's a hog. I thought, first off, it was a bear."

Maurice peered out from behind a tree. "Well, I'll be jiggered!" he exclaimed. "It's our old sow. She's been lost fer nigh onto two weeks, an' Dad's been huntin' fer her everywhere."

"That so? Then we'll drive her home."

"Aw, say, Bill," protested Maurice, "I'm tired an' wet as a water-logged plank. Let her go. I'll tell Dad, an' he kin come after her tomorrow."

"No, we'll drive her home now. I guess I know what's best. Get on t'other side of her. Now then, don't let her turn back!"

Maurice grumblingly did his share of the driving. It was no easy task to pilot that big, rangy sow into the safe harbor of the Keeler barnyard but done it was at last.

"Ma's got the light burnin' an' the strap waitin' fer her little boy," chaffed Billy as they put up the barn-yard bars.

Maurice, who had climbed the fence so as to get a glimpse of the interior of his home through a window, whistled

softly as his eyes took in the scene within.

"Say, Billy," he cried, "your Ma an' Pa's there."

"Gee whitticker!" exclaimed Billy. "I wish now I hadn't promised you I'd come in. All right, lead on. Let's get the funeral over with."

Without so much as another word the boys went up the path.

"If I don't see you ag'in alive, Bill, good bye," whispered Maurice as he opened the door.

Mrs. Keeler, who was doing her best to catch what her neighbor was saying, lifted her head as the two wet and tired boys entered the room.

"There they be now," she said grimly. "The two worst boys in Scotia, Mrs. Wilson."

"I believe you, Mrs. Keeler," nodded her friend. "Now then, where have you two drowned rats been tonight, Willium?"

Cobin Keeler, who was playing a game of checkers with Billy's father, cleared his throat and leaned forward like a judge on the bench, waiting for the answer to his neighbor's question.

"We got ——" commenced Maurice, but Billy pinched his leg for silence.

"I got track of your lost sow, Mr. Keeler, when I was comin' home from the store tonight," he said. "Least-wise I didn't know it was *your* sow but Maurice told me about yours bein' lost. So after Mrs. Keeler went to give Mr. Spencer a call down we hired Anse to look after the preservin' an' went out to try an' track her down."

Maurice, who had listened open mouthed to his chum's narration, sighed deeply. "We had an awful time," he put in, only to receive a harder pinch for his pains.

"But you didn't see her, did ye?" Cobin asked eagerly.

Disregarding the question, Billy continued: "The tracks led us a long ways, I kin tell you. We got up into the Scroggie bush at last an' then the rain come."

"But we kept right on trackin—" put in Maurice, eagerly. "After the stars come out again, of course," explained Billy, managing to skin Maurice's shin with his boot-heel, "an' we found her—"

"You found her?" cried Cobin, leaping up.

"Jest half an hour ago," said Billy.

"Good lads!" cried Cobin heartily, "Ma, hear that? They found ol' Junefly. Wasn't that smart of 'em, an' in all that rain, too."

"Who'd you say was agoin' to soon die?" Mrs. Keeler put her hand to her ear and leaned forward.

"I say the boys found the old *sow*, Ma!" Cobin shouted.

"They *did*?" Mrs. Keeler turned towards Billy and Maurice, her face aglow. "An' was that what they was adoin'? Now I'm right sorry I spoke harsh. I am so. Ain't you, Mrs. Wilson?"

"Oh, I must say that Willium does do somethin' worth while, once in a long while," returned her neighbor, grudgingly. "But Anson, now—"

Mrs. Keeler broke in. "Anson, humph! Why, that boy had the nerve to say that I should give him ten cents fer watchin' the kettle while them two dear boys was out in the storm, huntin' fer Pa's sow. I give him a box on the ear instead an' sent him home on the jump. Maybe I was a bit hasty but I was mad after havin' to give that old Caleb Spencer a piece of my mind fer sendin' me sawdust instead of groceries. I guess he won't try that ag'in."

Billy moved towards the door. "I'd best be gettin' home," he said, "I'm awful wet."

"Stay all night with Maurice," invited Mrs. Keeler.

"You an' him kin pile right into bed now and I'll bring you both a bowl of hot bread and milk."

Billy glanced at his mother.

"You kin stay if your want to, Willium," she said, "only see that you are home bright and early in the mornin'. Your Pa'll want you to help hill potatoes."

She stood up. "Well, Tom, if you and Cobin are through with the game don't start another. It's late an' time all decent folks was home abed."

Snug in Maurice's corn-husk bed in the attic, the boys lay and listened for the door to open and close. Then Maurice chuckled.

"Gee! Bill, I could'a knocked your head off fer makin' me help drive ol' June fly home but now I see you knowed what you was doin'. Holy smoke! I wish't I was as smart as you."

"Go to sleep," said Billy drowsily.

Half an hour later when Mrs. Keeler carrying two bowls of steaming bread and milk ascended the stairs Billy alone sat up to reach for it.

"Is Maurice asleep?" whispered the woman.

Billy nodded.

"Well, you might as well have both bowls then. I don't like to see good bread an' milk wasted."

She set the bowls down on the little table beside the bed, placed the lamp beside them, then leaning over tucked the blankets about the boys.

"No use tryin' to wake Maurice," she said as she turned to go. "As well try to wake the dead. Remember, you boys get up when I call you."

CHAPTER IX

MOVING THE MENAGERIE

Billy and Maurice, taking the short cut to the Wilson farm across the rain-drenched fields next morning, were planning the day's programme.

"Now that we've got ol' Harry's charm along with my rabbit-foot," Billy was saying, "we ought'a be able to snoop 'round in the ha'nted grove an' even hunt through the house any time we take the notion. Maybe we'll get a chance to do it to-day."

"But, darn it all, Bill," Maurice objected, "there won't be no ghost to lead the way to the stuff in the daytime."

"Well, if we take a look over the place in daylight we'll know the lay-out better at night, won't we? Trigger Finger Tim did that most times, an' he always got away clean. Supposin' a ghost is close at your heels, ain't it a good idea to have one or two good runways picked out to skip on? We're goin' through that ha'nted house in daylight, so you might as well make up your mind to that."

Maurice was about to protest further when the rattle of loose spokes and the beat of a horse's hoofs on the hard road fell on their ears.

"That's Deacon Ringold's buck-board," Billy informed his chum, drawing him behind an alder-screened stump. "Say, ain't he *drivin'*? Somebody must be sick at his place." Then as the complaining vehicle swept into sight from around the curve, "By crackey, Maurice, your Pa's ridin' with him."

Maurice scratched his head in perplexity. "Wonder

where he's takin' Dad? It's too late fer sheep-shearin' an' too early fer hog-killin'; an' that's 'bout all Dad's good at doin', 'cept leadin' the singin' at prayer-meetin'. Wonder what's up? Gee! the deacon is sure puttin' his old mare over the road."

"Keep quiet till they get past," cautioned Billy. "Say! we needn't have been so blamed careful about makin' our sneak if we'd knowed your Pa was away from home."

"Oh, look, Bill," said Maurice, "they're stoppin' at your place."

The deacon had pulled up at the Wilson's gate. "He's shoutin' fer Pa," Billy whispered, as a resounding "Hello, Tom!" awoke the forest echoes. "Come on Maurice, let's work our way down along this strip o' bushes, so's we kin hear what's goin' on."

The boys wriggled their way through the thicket of sumach, and reached a clump of golden-rod inside the road fence just as Wilson came out of the lane.

"Mornin', neighbors," he greeted the men in the buckboard, "won't you pull in?"

"No," said the deacon, "we're on our way to Twin Oaks, Thomas. Thieves broke into Spencer's store last night. We're goin' up to see if we can be of any use to Caleb. We'd like you to come along."

Wilson's exclamation of surprise was checked by Cobin Keeler, whose long arm reached out and encircled him. He was lifted bodily into the seat and the buckboard dashed on up the road, the clatter of its loose spokes drowning the loud voices of its occupants.

The boys sat up and stared at each other.

"You heard?" Billy asked in awed tones.

Maurice nodded. "They said thieves at the store." Forgotten, for the moment, was old Scroggie's ghost and

the buried treasure in this new something which promised mystery and adventure.

"Hully Gee!" whispered Billy. "Ain't that rippin'."

"Ain't it jest?" agreed Maurice. "Say, Bill, there ain't no law ag'in shootin' robbers is there — store-robbers, I mean?"

"Naw, why should there be? That's what you're supposed to do, if you get the chance — shoot 'em, an' get the reward."

"What's a reward?"

"Why, it's money, you ninny! You kill the robbers an' you get the church collection an' lots of other money besides. Then you're rich an' don't ever have to do any work; jest fish an' hunt an' give speeches at tea-meetin's an' things."

"Oh, hokey! ain't that great. How'd you come to know all that, Bill?"

"Why I read it in Anson's book, 'Trigger-Finger Tim er Dead er Alive.' Oh, it's all hunky, I tell you."

"But, Bill, how we goin' to kill them robbers?"

"Ain't goin' to kill 'em," his friend replied. "Trigger-Finger Tim never killed his; he took 'em all alive. All he did was *crease* their skulls with bullets, an' scrape their spines with 'em, an' when they come to they'd find themselves tied hand an' foot, an' Trigger-Finger smokin' his cigarette an' smilin' down on 'em."

"Gollies!" exulted Maurice. Then uncertainty in his tones, "A feller 'ud have to be a mighty good shot to do that though, Bill."

"Oh shucks! What's the use of thinkin' 'bout that now? We've gotta catch them robbers first, ain't we?"

"Yep, that's so. But how?"

Billy wriggled free of the golden-rod. "Come on over an' help me move my menagerie an' we'll plan out a way."

They climbed the fence and crossed the road to the lane-gate.

"Now, then," said Billy, "you scoot through the trees to the root-house, while I go up to the kitchen an' sneak some doughnuts. Don't let Ma catch a glimpse of you er she'll come lookin' fer me an' set me to churnin' er somethin' right under her eyes. An' see here," he warned, as Maurice made for the trees, "don't you get to foolin' with the snakes er owls, an' you best keep out of ol' Ring-do's reach, 'cause he's a bad ol' swamp coon in some ways. You jest lay close till I come back."

Whistling soundlessly, Billy went up the path to the house. He peered carefully in through the screened door. The room was empty and so was the pantry beyond. Billy entered, tiptoed softly across to the pantry and filled his pockets with doughnuts from the big crock in the cupboard. Then he tip-toed softly out again.

As he rounded the kitchen, preparatory to a leap across the open space between it and the big wood-pile, Mrs. Wilson's voice came to him, high-pitched and freighted with anger.

"You black, thievin' passel of impudence, you!" she was saying. "If I had a stick long enough to reach you, you'd never dirty any more of my new-washed clothes."

On the top-most branch of a tall, dead pine, close beside the wood-pile, sat the tame crow, Croaker, his head cocked demurely on one side, as he listened to the woman's righteous abuse. Croaker could no more help filling his claws with chips and dirt and wobbling the full length of a line filled with snowy, newly-washed clothes than he could help upsetting the pan of water in the chicken-pen, when he saw the opportunity. He hated anything white with all his sinful little heart and he hated the game rooster in the same way. He was always in trouble with Ma Wilson, always

in trouble with the rooster. Only when safe in the highest branch of the pine was he secure, and in a position to talk back to his persecutors.

He said something now, low and guttural, to the woman shaking her fist at him in impotent anger. His voice was almost human in tone, his attitude so sinister that she shuddered. "That's right, swear at me, too," she cried, "add insult to injury, you black imp! If it wasn't fer bein' scared of shootin' myself I'd get the gun an' shoot *you*, I would so!"

Suddenly Croaker stretched himself erect. A soft whistle, so low as to be inaudible to the indignant woman but clear to his acute ears, had sounded from the far side of the wood pile. Pausing only long enough to locate the sound, Croaker spread his wings and volplaned down, emitting a hoarse croak of triumph almost in Mrs. Wilson's face, as he swept close above her.

"Come here, you," spoke a low voice as Croaker settled on the other side of the wood pile, and the crow promptly perched himself on Billy's shoulder with a succession of throaty notes that sounded like crazy laughter, but which were really expressions of unadulterated joy. For this boy who had taken him from the nest in the swaying elm when he was nothing but a half-feathered, wide-mouthed fledgling, and had fed him, cared for him, defended him against cat, dog, rooster and human beings—for this boy alone Croaker felt all the love his selfish heart was capable of giving.

And now as Billy carried him towards the root-house he recited the various adventures which had been his since they had parted, recited them, it is true, in hoarse unintelligible crow-language, but which Billy was careful to indicate he understood right well.

“ So you did all that, did you? ” he laughed. “ Oh, but you’re a smart bird. But see here, if you go on the way you’re doin’, dirtyin’ Ma’s clean clothes an’ abusin’ her like I heard you doin’, your light’s goin’ out sudden one of these days. Ma’s scared to shoot the ol’ gun herself, but she’ll get Anse to do it. I guess I better shut you up on wash-mornin’s after this.”

“ What’s he been doin’ now, Bill? ” asked Maurice as Billy and the crow joined him beside the root-house.

“ Oh, he’s been raisin’ high jinks with Ma ag’in,” explained Billy. “ He *will* get his claws full o’ dirt an’ pigeon-toe along her line of clean clothes, as soon as her back’s turned.”

“ Gosh! ain’t he a terror? ” Maurice exclaimed. “ Say, why don’t you put him in the menagerie ”

“ Maurice, you’ve got about as much sense as a wood-tick,” Billy replied in disgust. “ How long d’ye s’pose my snakes an’ bats an’ lizards ’ud last if I turned Croaker loose in there? ”

“ Pshaw! Bill, he couldn’t hurt Spotba, the womper, could he? ”

“ Jest couldn’t he? I’ll take you down to the marsh some day an’ show you how quick he kin kill a womper.”

“ Gollics! Is that so? Well he couldn’t hurt the black snake; that’s one sure thing.”

“ No, it ain’t, ’cause he kin kill a black snake a sight easier than he kin a womper, an’ I’ll tell you why. Black-snakes have got teeth. They bite. But their backbone is easy broke. A womper hasn’t any teeth. He strikes with his bony nose. You know what one of them snakes kin do? You saw that big one, down in Patterson’s swamp lay open Moll’s face with one slash. They’re thick necked, an’ take a lot of killin’. This crow kin kill a black-snake

with one slash of his bill. He has to choke the womper to death."

Maurice scratched his head thoughtfully. "Say, you know a lot about snakes an' things, don't you?" he said admiringly.

"Maybe I do, but I ain't tellin' all I know," said Billy. "What's the good? Nobody 'ud believe me."

"What you mean, believe you?"

"Why, if I said I saw a fight between a little brown water-snake no bigger'n a garter snake, an' a fish-hawk, an' the snake licked the hawk, d'ye s'pose anyone 'ud believe that?"

"I dunno. Maybe, an' maybe not."

"Supposin' I said the snake *killed the hawk*?"

"Oh, gee whitticker! nobody 'ud believe that, Bill."

"There now. Nobody 'ud believe it. An' yet I saw it."

"You saw it?" Maurice, who could not think of questioning his chum's word, gasped in amazement.

"Yep, I saw it last spring—in the Eau rice beds, it was. I was tryin' to find a blue-winged teal's nest. Saw the drake trail off an' knowed the duck must be settin' somewhere on the high land close beside the pond. As I was standin' still, lookin' about, this little water snake come swimmin' 'cross a mushrat run. Jest then I saw a shadder cross the reeds, an' a fish-hawk swooped down an' made a grab at the snake. The snake dived an' come up close to shore. The hawk wheeled an' swooped ag'in. This time the water was too shallow fer snakie to get clear away. The hawk grabbed him in his claws an' started up with him. 'Goodbye, little snake,' I thought, an' jest then I noticed that the hawk was havin' trouble; fer one thing, he wasn't flyin' straight, an' he was strikin' with his curved beak without findin' anythin'. Pretty soon he

started saggin' down to the reeds. I jumped into the punt an' made fer the spot where I thought he'd come down. Jest as I got there he splashed into the shallow water. I stood up in the punt, an' then I saw what had happened. The little water-snake had coiled round the hawk's neck an' had kept its head close under his throat. You know that a water snake has two little saw teeth, one on each side of the upper jaw. I've often wondered what good a pair of teeth like that could be to 'em, but I don't any more, 'cause that little snake had cut that hawk's throat with them snags an' saved himself."

"An' so he got away!" sighed Maurice.

"Well, he should have, but I didn't let him. I thought I'd like to own a snake as plucky as that, so I caught him—didn't have no trouble, he was awful tired—an' brought him up here to the menagerie."

Maurice whistled. "Gee! Bill, you don't mean t' tell me that water-snake you call Hawk-killer is him?"

"Yep, that's him. Now," he cried tossing Croaker into a tree, "I'll tell you what we gotta do. We gotta move these pets down to that old sugar-shanty in our woods. Ma's got so nervous with havin' 'em here that I'm afraid Anse might take it in his head to let 'em out, er kill 'em. I've got 'em all boxed nice an' snug. All I want you to do is help me carry 'em. We can do it in two trips. Ringdo, of course, 'll stay along up here. Ma's not scared of him like she is of the other things. Come along."

He unpropped the root-house door and threw it open. Maurice hesitated on the threshold, peering into the darkness.

"Are you sure you've got 'em boxed safe, Bill?" he asked, fearfully.

"Bet ye I am."

“Then, here’s fer it, but I must say I’ll be glad when the job’s done,” shivered Maurice, following his chum into the blackness of the root-house.

Croaker hopped to a lower branch and peered in after his master. Then, catching sight of a doughnut which had spilled from Billy’s pocket, he fluttered down to the ground, and with many caressing croaks proceeded to make a meal of it.

CHAPTER X

IN LOST MAN'S SWAMP

The August days were passing swiftly, each fragrant dawn marking another step towards that inevitable something which must be faced — the reopening of the Valley School by a new teacher. Billy's heart saddened as the fields ripened and the woods turned red and gold. For once his world was out of tune. Maurice Keeler was sick with measles and Elgin Scraff lay ill with the same disease. Taking advantage of this fact, the Sand-sharkers had grown bold, some of the more venturesome of them going even so far as to challenge Billy to "knock the chip off their shoulders."

Billy had not only accommodated the trouble-seekers in this regard but had nearly knocked the noses off their freckled faces as well, after which he had proceeded to lick, on sight, each and every Sand-sharker with whom his lonely rambles brought him in contact. But his victories lacked the old time zest. He missed Maurice's "Gee! Bill, that left swing to his eye was a corker"; missed Elgin's offer to bet a thousand dollars that Billy Wilson could lick, with one hand tied behind him, any two Sand-sharkers that ever smelled a smoked herrin'. Victory was indeed empty of glory. And so the glad days were sad days for Billy. It was an empty world. What boy in Billy's place would not have been low-spirited under like conditions? What boy would not have paused, as he was doing now, to itemize his woes?

He was seated on a stump in the new clearing which

sloped to Levee Creek, fingers locked about one knee, battered felt hat pulled over his eyes. The green slope at his feet lay half in the sunlight, half in the shadow. Across from a patch of golden-rod, the cock bird of a fox-scattered quail-covey whistled the "All's Well" call to the birds in hiding. Ordinarily Billy would have answered that call, would have drawn the brown, scuttling birds close about him with the low-whistled notes he could produce so well; but today he was oblivious to all save his thoughts.

Two weeks had passed since the robbery of the Twin Oaks store and that which he and Maurice had planned to do towards finding the Scroggie will and capturing the thieves had, through dire necessity, been abandoned. Sickness had claimed Maurice just when he was most needed. For days Billy had lived a sort of trancelike existence; had gone about acting queerly, refusing his meals and paying little attention to anybody or anything.

It had become a regular thing for his father to say each morning, "I guess you ain't feelin' up to much today, Billy; so all you have to do is watch the gap and water the cattle"; which was quite agreeable to Billy, because it gave him an opportunity to be by himself. Men who sit in the shadow of irrevocable fate are always that way; they want to be left alone — murderers on the eve of their execution, captains on wrecked ships, Trigger Finger Tim, who was to be shot at sunrise, but wasn't.

Billy wanted to shadow old Scroggie's ghost and so discover the will; he wanted to seek out the robbers of the Twin Oaks store and earn a reward; he wanted Maurice Keeler with him; he wanted to hear Elgin Scraff's laugh. But all this was denied him. And now a new burden had been thrust upon him, compared with which all his other woes seemed trivial. Old Scroggie's namesake and ap-

parent heir had turned up again. Billy had seen him with his own eyes; with his own ears had heard him declare that he intended to erect a saw-mill in the thousand-acre forest. This meant that the big hardwood wonderland would be wiped away and that Frank Stanhope would never inherit what was rightfully his.

It seemed like an evil dream, but Billy knew it was no dream. Scroggie, astride a big bay horse, had passed him while he was on his way to the store with a basket of eggs for his mother, and he had pulled in at the store just as Deacon Ringold had taken the last available space on the customers' bench outside, and Caleb Spencer had come to the door to peer through the twilight in search of the Clearview stage, which was late. Noticing the stranger on horseback Caleb had hurried forward to ask how best he could serve him.

Hidden safely behind a clump of cedars Billy had watched and listened. He had heard Scroggie tell the store-keeper that he and his family had come to Scotia to stay and that he intended to cut down the timber of the big woods. He had then demanded that Spencer turn over to him a certain document which it seemed old man Scroggie had left in Caleb's charge some months before his death. Billy had seen Spencer draw the man a little apart from the others, who had gathered close through curiosity, and had heard him explain that the paper had been taken from his safe on the night of the robbery of his store. Scroggie had, at first, seemed to doubt Caleb's word; then he had grown abusive and had raised his riding-whip threateningly. Here Billy, having heard and seen quite enough, had acted. Placing his basket gently down on the sward he had picked up an egg and with the accuracy born of long practice in throwing stones, had sent it crash-

ing into Scroggie's face. Gasping and temporarily blinded, Scroggie had wheeled his horse and galloped away.

But today Billy, musing darkly, knew that Scroggie would do what he had said he would do. The big woods was his, according to law; he could do as he wished with it, and he would wipe it out.

With a sigh, Billy slid from the stump and stood looking away toward the east. What would Trigger Finger Tim do in his place? When confronted by insurmountable obstacles Trigger Finger had been wont to seek excitement and danger. That's what he, Billy, would do now. But where was excitement and danger to be found? Ah, he knew — Lost Man's Swamp!

Billy's right hand went into a trouser's pocket; then nervously his left dived into the other pocket. With a sigh of relief he drew out a furry object about the size of a pocket-knife.

"Ol' Rabbit-foot charm," he said, aloud. "I jest might need you bad today." Then he turned and walked quickly across the fallow toward the causeway.

Some three miles east of the imaginary line which divided the Settlement from the outside world, on the Lake Shore road, stood a big frame house in a grove of tall walnut trees. It was the home of a man named Hinter—a man of mystery. Before it the lake flashed blue as a kingfisher's wing through the cedars; behind it swept a tangle of forest which gradually dwarfed into a stretch of swamp-willow and wild hazel-nut bushes, which in turn gave place to marshy bog-lands.

Lost Man's Swamp, so called because it was said that one straying into its depths never was able to extricate himself from its overpowering mists and treacherous quicksands, was lonely and forsaken. It lay like a fester-

ing sore on the breast of the world—black, menacing, hungry to gulp, dumb as to those mysteries and tragedies it had witnessed. It was whispered that the devil made his home in its pitchy ponds, which even in the fiercest cold of winter did not freeze.

For Billy, who knew and understood so well the sweeping wilderness of silence and mysteries, this swamp held a dread which, try as he might, he could not analyze. On one other occasion had he striven to penetrate it, but as if the bogland recognized in him a force not easily set aside, it had enwrapped him with its deadly mists which chilled and weakened, torn his flesh with its razor-edged grass and sucked at his feet with its oozy, dragging quicksands. He had turned back in time. For two weeks following his exploit he had lain ill with ague, shivering miserably, silent, but thinking.

And now he was back again; and this time he did not intend to risk his life in those sucking sands. From a couple of dead saplings, with the aid of wild grape-vines, he fashioned a light raft which would serve as a support in the bog, and carry his weight in the putrid mire beyond. Strange sounds came to his ears as he worked his way across the desolate waste toward the first great pond—scurrying, rustling sounds of hidden things aroused from their security. Once a big grey snake stirred from torpor to lift its head and hiss at him. Billy lifted it aside with his pole and went on.

Great mosquitoes whined about his head and stung his neck and ears. Mottled flies bit him and left a burning smart. The saw-like edges of the grass cut his hands and strove to trip him as he pushed his improvised raft forward. Once his foot slipped on the greasy bog, and the quicksands all but claimed him. But he pushed on, reach-

ing at last the black sullen shallows, putrid and ill-smelling with decayed growth, and alive with hideous insects.

Great, black leeches clung to the slimy lily-roots; water lizards lay basking half in and half out of the water, or crept furtively from under-water grotto to grotto. And there were other things which Billy knew were hidden from his sight — things even more loathsome. For the first time in his life he experienced for Nature a feeling akin to dread and loathing. It was like a nightmare to him, menacing, unreal, freighted with strange horrors.

One thing Billy saw which he could not understand. The greasy surface of the shallow pond was never still, but bubbled incessantly as porridge puffs and bubbles when it boils. It was as if the slimy creatures buried in the cozy bottom belched forth their poisonous breath as they stirred in sleep.

So here lay the reason that the swamp-waters never froze even when winter locked all other waters fast in its icy clutch! What caused those air bubbles, if air bubbles they were?

At last, sick and dizzy, he turned from the place and with raft and pole fought his way back to the shore. Never again, he told himself, would he try to fathom further what lay in Lost Man's Swamp. Weary and perspiring, he climbed the wooded upland. He turned and dipped into the willows, intending to take the shortest way home through the hardwoods. On top of the beech knoll he paused for a moment to let his eyes rest on the big house in the walnut grove. In some vague way his mind connected its owner with that dead waste of stinking marsh. Why, he wondered, had Hinter chosen this lonely spot on which to build his home? As he turned to strike across the neck of woods between him and the causeway the man

about whom he had just been thinking stepped out from a clump of hazel-nut bushes directly in his path.

"Why, hello, Billy," he said pleasantly. "Out capturing more wild things for the menagerie?"

Hinter possessed a well modulated voice whose accent bespoke refinement and education. He had come into the Settlement about a year ago from no one knew where, apparently possessed of sufficient money to do as he pleased. An aged colored woman kept house for him. He held aloof from his neighbors, was reticent in manner, but nothing could be said against him. He led an exemplary if somewhat secluded life, gave freely to the church which he never attended, and was respected by the people of Scotia. With the children he was a great favorite. He was a tall man, gaunt and strong of frame and well past middle age. His face was grave and his blue eyes steady. He was fond of hunting and usually wore — as he was wearing today — a suit of corduroys. He kept a pair of ferocious dogs, why nobody knew, for they never accompanied him on his hunts.

He smiled now as he noted Billy's quick look of apprehension.

"No, Billy," he assured the boy, "Sphinx and Dexter aren't with me today, so you have nothing to fear from them. I doubt if they would hurt you, anyway," he added. "You can handle most dogs, I am told."

"I'm not afraid of no dog. Mr. Hinter," said Billy, "but I've been told your dogs are half wolf. Is that so?"

Hinter laughed. "Well, hardly," he returned. "They are thoroughbred Great Danes, although Sphinx and Dexter both have wolf natures, I fear."

"Is that why people don't go near your place, 'cause they're scared of the dogs?" Billy asked.

Hinter's face grew grave. "Perhaps," he answered. "I hope it is."

"Then why don't you get rid of 'em?"

Hinter shook his head. "Nobody would have them, they're too savage; and I haven't the heart to make away with them, because they are fond of me. I've had those dogs a long time, Billy."

"I understand," said Billy, sympathetically.

Hinter put his hand in his coat pocket and drew out an ivory dog-whistle. "Would you like to know them, Billy?" he asked, his keen eyes on the boy's face.

"I wouldn't mind," said Billy.

Hinter put the whistle to his lips and sent a warbling call through the woods. "Stand perfectly still," he said, as he placed the whistle back in his pocket. "I won't let them hurt you. Here they come now."

The next instant two great dogs plunged from the thicket, their heavy jaws open and dripping and their deep eyes searching for their master and the reason for his call.

Standing with feet planted wide Billy felt his heart beat quickly. "Easy, Sphinx!" Hinter cried, as the larger of the two sprang toward the boy. Immediately the dog sank down, the personification of submission; but its blood-shot eyes flashed up at Billy and in them the boy glimpsed a spirit unquelled.

"Be careful, Billy. Don't touch him!" warned Hinter, but he spoke too late. Billy had bent and laid his hand gently on the dog's quivering back. The low growl died in the animal's throat. Slowly his heavy muzzle was lifted until his nose touched Billy's cheek. Then his long flail-like tail began to wag.

"Boy, you're a wonder!" Hinter cried. "But you took a terrible chance. Dexter!" he said to the other

dog, "don't you want to be friends with this wild-animal tamer, too?"

Billy, his arm about Sphinx's neck, spoke. "Come, ol' feller; come here," he said.

The great dog rose and came slowly across to him. "Good boy!" Billy slapped him roughly on the shoulder, and he whined.

"Well, it's beyond me," confessed Hinter. "I've heard that you could handle dogs, young fellow, but I didn't think there was anybody in the world besides myself who could bring a whimper of gladness from that pair. Now then, Dexter! Sphinx! away home with you." Obediently the big dogs wheeled back into the thicket.

Billy started to move away. "I must be gettin' home," he said. "The cows 'll be waitin' to be watered."

"Well, I'll just walk along with you as far as the Causeway," said Hinter. "My saddle-horse has wandered off somewhere. I have an idea he made for Ringold's slashing."

He fell in beside Billy, adjusting his stride to the shorter one of the boy. In silence they walked until they reached a rise of land which had been cleared of all varieties of trees except maples. Sap-suckers twittered as they hung head downward and red squirrels chattered shrilly. In a cleared spot in the wood, beside a spring-fed creek, stood a sugar-shanty, two great cauldrons, upside down, gleaming like black eyes from its shadowy interior. A pile of wooden sap-troughs stood just outside the shanty door.

Billy's eyes brightened as they swept the big sugar-bush. Many a spicy spring night had he enjoyed here, "sugarin' off"—he and Teacher Stanhope. The brightness faded from his eyes and his lip quivered. Never again would the man who was boy-friend to him point out the frost-

cleared stars that swam low down above the maples and describe to him their wonders. Those stars were shut out from him forever, as were the tints of skies and flowers and all glad lights of the world.

Hinter's voice brought him back to himself. "He is blind, they tell me, Billy."

Billy gazed at him wonderingly. "How did you know I was thinkin' of *him*?" he asked.

Hinter smiled. "Never mind," he said gently. "And how is he standing it?"

A spasm of pain crossed the boy's face. "Like a man," he answered shortly.

Hinter's eyes fell away from that steady gaze. Billy turned towards the log-span across the creek, then paused to ask suddenly: "Mr. Hinter, who owns that Lost Man's Swamp? Do you?"

The man started. "No," he answered, "I don't own it exactly, but I hope to soon. It is part of the Scroggie property. I am negotiating now with Scroggie's heir for it. It is useless, of course, but I desire to own it for reasons known only to myself."

"But supposin' ol' Scroggie's lost will comes to light?"

"Then, of course, it will divert to Mr. Stanhope," answered Hinter. "I must confess," he added, "I doubt very strongly if Mr. Scroggie ever made a will."

Billy was silent, busy with his own thoughts. They crossed the bridge, passed through a beech ridge and descended a mossy slope to the Causeway fence. As they sat for a moment's rest on its topmost rail, Hinter spoke abruptly. "I saw you fighting your way across the swamp this afternoon, Billy. Weren't you taking a useless risk?"

Billy made no reply.

"You are either a very brave boy or a very foolish

one," said Hinter. "Will you tell me what prompted you to dare what no other person in the Settlement would dare? Was it simply curiosity?"

"I guess maybe it was," Billy confessed. "Anyways I've got all I want of it. It'll be a long time afore you see me there ag'in."

Hinter's sigh of relief was inaudible to the boy. "That's a good resolve," he commended. "Stick to it; that swamp is a treacherous place."

"It's awful," said Billy in awed tones. "I got as far as the first pond. It was far enough for me."

"You got as far as the pond!" Hinter cried in wonder. The eyes turned on Billy's face were searching. "And you found only a long shallow of stagnant, stinking water, I'll be bound," he laughed, uneasily.

"I found —" Billy commenced, his mind flashing back to the bubbling geysers of the pond—then chancing to catch the expression in Hinter's face he finished, "jest what you said, a big pond of stinkin' dead water, crawlin' with all kinds of blood-suckers an' things."

He leaped from the fence. "Good bye," he called back over his shoulder. "I hear old Cherry bawlin' fer her drink."

Hinter was still seated on the fence when Billy turned the curve in the road. "I wonder what he wants of Lost Man's Swamp," mused the boy. "An' I wonder what he's scared somebody 'll find there?"

CHAPTER XI

EDUCATING THE NEW BOY

As Billy rounded a curve in the road he met the cattle. Anson was driving them. "You needn't mind turnin' back, Bill," he said. "I don't mind waterin' 'em fer you."

Billy whistled. "Gosh! you're gettin' kind all at once, Anse," he exclaimed.

"I don't mind doin' it," Anse repeated. He kept his face averted. Billy, scenting mystery, walked over to him and swung him about. Anson's lip was swollen and one eye was partly closed and his freckled face bore the marks of recent conflict.

"Gee whitticker!" gasped Billy, "you must been havin' an argument with a mule. Who give you that black eye an' split lip, Anse?"

His brother hung his head. "You needn't go to rubbin' it in," he whined; "I didn't have no chance with him. He piled on me from behind, when I wasn't lookin'."

"Who piled on you from behind?"

"That new boy; his name's Jim Scroggie. His dad's rented the Stanley house on the hill."

"Likely story that about his pilin' on you from behind," scoffed Billy. "You met him on the path an' tried to get gay with him, more like, an' he pasted you a few. You shouldn't hunt trouble, Anse; you can't fight, an' you know it. What's this new boy like?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, you'll find that out soon enough," promised Anson. "He told me to tell you that he would do the same thing to you first chance he got."

"Oh, no, he didn't neither," laughed Billy. "He can't be that foolish."

"You wait till you size him up," said Anson. "He's taller'n you are an' heavier, too. Oh, you'll have your hands full when he tackles you, Mister Scrapper-Bill."

Billy pinched off a fox-tail stock and chewed it thoughtfully. "Maybe," he said, cheerfully. "He certainly tapped you some, but then you're always huntin' trouble, an' it serves you right."

"Listen to me!" Anson cried. "He made all the trouble, I tell you. All I did was tell him not to throw clubs at Ringdo —"

"What! Was he throwin' clubs at my coon?" Billy shouted.

"You bet he was. Had Ringdo up a tree an' was doin' his best to knock him out."

Billy spit out the fox-tail. "Where's this feller Scroggie now?" he asked, in a business-like tone.

"I dunno. I s'pose he's prowlin' 'round the beech grove, up there. He said he intended lickin' every boy in this settlement on sight. You best not go lookin' fer him, Bill. I don't want'a see you get beat up on my account."

"Well you needn't worry; if I get beat up it won't be on your account, I kin tell you that. I don't aim to let anybody throw clubs at my pets, though. You drive the cattle on down; I'm goin' up to the grove."

A gleam of satisfaction lit Anson's shifty eyes. "All right," he said shortly, and went off after the herd.

Billy climbed the rail fence and crossed the basswood swale to the highland. He approached the beech grove cautiously and peered about him. Seated on a log at the lower end of a grassy glade was a boy about his own age, a boy with round, bullet head poised on a thick neck set between square shoulders.

Billy, taking his measure with one fleeting glance, stepped out from the trees. Simultaneously the strange boy rose slowly, head lowered, fists clenched. There was nothing antagonistic in Billy's attitude as he surveyed the new boy with serious grey eyes. That expression had fooled more than one competitor in fistic combat, and it fooled Jim Scroggie now. "He's scared stiff," was the new boy's thought, as he swaggered forward to where Billy stood.

"I've been waitin' for you and now I'm goin' to lick you," he said.

Billy eyed him appraisingly. He did look like a tough proposition, no doubt about that. His face was round, flat, small-featured. "That face 'll stand a lot of pum-melin'," Billy told himself, and as he noted the heavy chin, thrust antagonistically forward, "no use bruisin' my knuckles on that," he decided.

"You heard what I said, didn't you?" growled the challenger. "I'm goin' to lick you."

Billy grinned. He had caught the gasp at the end of the speaker's words; *now* he knew where lay the stranger's weak spot — *his wind!*

"But I ain't wantin' to fight," Billy returned gently.

"Why? scared?"

"Nice boys don't fight." Billy shifted his feet uneasily, the movement bringing him a step or two closer to the other.

"Bah! mommie's baby boy won't fight?" taunted the eager one. "But by gollies! I'm goin' to make you," he added, scowling fiercely.

Billy wanted to laugh, but he was too good a ring-general to give way to his feelings. Instead, he shifted his feet again, thereby getting within reaching distance of the one so anxious for battle.

"Now, then," declared Scroggie, tossing his hat on the

sward and drying his moist palms on his trouser-legs, "I'm goin' to black your eyes and pummel the nose off your face."

The last word was drowned in a resounding "smack." Billy had delivered one of his lightning, straight-arm punches fair on the sneering lips of the new boy. Scroggie staggered back, recovered his balance, and threw himself on the defensive in time to block Billy's well-aimed right to the neck.

"So that's your game, is it?" he grunted. "Here's a new one for you then." That "new one" was a veritable "hay-maker." Had it landed where it was intended to land the fight must have ended then and there. But it didn't. Billy saw it coming and ducked.

Scroggie rushed, managing to get in a stiff jab to Billy's body and receiving in return one which promptly closed one of his small optics. He struck out wildly, but Billy was prancing six feet away. Scroggie's swollen and bleeding mouth twisted in a grin. "Oh, I'll get you," he promised. "Stall if you want'a, it's all one to me. You won't find me sleepin' again, I promise you."

Billy advanced in a crouching attitude. His eyes were on Scroggie's uninjured eye and Scroggie, now grown wary, read that look as Billy intended he should. Older fighters have made the same mistake that Scroggie made. As Billy leaped in Scroggie raised his guard to his face and Billy's right and left thudded home to the flabby stomach of his adversary.

With a gasp Scroggie went to earth, where he lay writhing. After a time he struggled to a sitting posture.

"Got enough?" asked Billy pleasantly.

The vanquished one nodded. He had not as yet recovered his breath sufficiently to speak. When at last he was able

to draw a full breath, he said: "Say, you trimmed me all right, all right."

Billy grinned.

"Who are you, anyway?" asked Scroggie as he got groggily to his feet.

"I'm the feller that owns the coon you tried to club to death," Billy answered.

Scroggie's mouth fell open in surprise. "I didn't try to kill any coon," he denied. "I saw one but it wasn't me that clubbed it; it was a tall, sandy-haired feller with a squint eye. I asked him what he was tryin' to do and he told me to dry up and mind my own business. I had to give him a lickin'. He went off blubberin'; said if I wasn't too scared to stick around he'd send a feller over who would fix me. So I stayed."

"I wish you had licked him harder'n you did," frowned Billy.

"Know him?"

"Well, I do — an' I don't. He's my half-brother an' a sneak if ever there was one. He lied about you to me — so's I'd fight you."

"And what's your name?"

"Billy Wilson."

Scroggie stared. "I've heard of you," he said, "an' the feller who told me you could lick your weight in wildcats wasn't far wrong. You had me fooled, though," he laughed. "I swallowed what you said about nice boys not fightin', swallowed it whole. Oh, Moses!"

Billy sat down on a stump. "I don't bear no grudge, do you?" he asked.

"No, I'm willin' to shake." Scroggie extended his hand.

"Your name's Scroggie, ain't it?" Billy asked.

"Yep, Jim Scroggie."

"Your Dad's goin' to cut down the Scroggie woods, I hear?"

"Yep, if he can get his price for the timber."

Billy sat looking away. His grey eyes had grown somber. "See here," he said suddenly, "do you know that old man Scroggie left a will?"

"Dad says not," the other boy replied.

"Well, then, he did; an' in that will he left his woods an' money to Mr. Stanhope, my teacher."

"If that's so, Dad has no right to that woods," said Jim.

"But supposin' the will can't be found?" Billy looked the other boy in the face and waited for the answer.

"Why, I can't see that that ought'a make any difference," Scroggie replied. "If you folks down here know that Uncle left his money and place to your teacher, that ought'a be enough for Dad."

"Of course the timber's worth a lot," sparred Billy.

"But Dad don't need it," Jim declared. "He's rich now."

"He is?" Billy respected the new boy for the nonchalance of his tones. Riches hadn't made him stuck up, at any rate.

"Yep," went on Scroggie, "Dad owns some big oil wells in the States. He ain't got any business down here anyways, but he's so pig-headed you can't tell him anythin'; I'll say that much, even if he is my father. It's bad enough for him to lug me away from town, but he made Lou come along, too."

"Lou?"

"She's my sister," Jim explained proudly. "She's a year younger'n me. Dad says she looks just like Mother looked. I guess that's the reason she kin do most anythin' she likes with him. But she couldn't get him to let her

stay in Cleveland. He brought her along and Aunt too. Aunt keeps house for us."

"I guess your Dad don't think much of us folks down here, does he?" Billy asked.

Scroggie chuckled. "Dad ain't got any use for anybody, much," he answered. "I never heard him say anythin' about any of the people of the Settlement but once, and that was just t'other night. He come home lookin' as if somebody had pushed his head into a crate of eggs. I was too scared to ask him how it happened and Lou wouldn't. Dad said the people 'round here are a bad lot and it wouldn't surprise him if they tried to kill him."

Billy threw back his head and laughed, the first hearty laugh he had known for days. Scroggie, in spite of the pain his swollen lips caused him, laughed too.

"Say," he remarked, hesitatingly, "you got a great laugh, Billy."

"Oh I don't know," Billy replied. "What makes you think so, Jim?" Scroggie sat down beside him on the log. "I had a chum in the city who laughed just like you do. Gosh, nobody'll know how much I miss him."

"Dead?"

Scroggie nodded. "Drowned through an air-hole in the lake. Say, Billy, do you skate?"

"Some."

"Swim?"

"A little."

"Shoot?"

Billy scratched his head reflectively. "Not much, any more," he said. "Course I like duck-shootin', an' do quite a lot of it in the fall."

"How 'bout quail?"

"I don't shoot quail any more," Billy answered. "I've

got to know 'em too well, I guess. You see," in answer to the other boy's look of surprise, "when a feller gets to know what chummy, friendly little beggars they are, he don't feel like shootin' 'em."

"But they're wild, ain't they and they're game birds?"

"They're wild if you make 'em wild, but if they get to know that you like 'em an' won't hurt 'em, they get real tame. I've got one flock I call my own. I fed 'em last winter when the snow was so deep they couldn't pick up a livin'. They used to come right into our barn-yard for the tailin's I throwed out to 'em."

"What's tailin's?"

"It's the chaff and small wheat the fannin' mill blows out from the good grain. Pa lets me have it fer my wild birds. I've got some partridge up on the hickory knoll, too. They're shyer than the quail, but I've got 'em so tame I kin call 'em and make 'em come to me."

"You kin?" Jim exclaimed. "Well, I'll be razzle-dazzled!"

"So, I don't shoot partridge neither," said Billy. "I don't blame anybody else fer shootin' 'em, remember, but somehow, I'd rather leave 'em alive."

"I see," said Scroggie. Of course he didn't, but he wanted to make Billy feel that he did.

"Well you do more than most people, then," said Billy. "The folks 'round here think I'm crazy, I guess, an' Joe Scraff — he's got an English setter dog an' shoots a lot; he told me that if he happened onto my quail an' partridge he'd bag as many of 'em as he could. I told him that if he shot my birds, he'd better watch out fer his white Leghorn chickens but he laughed at me."

"And did he shoot your quail?" asked Scroggie.

Billy nodded. "Once. Flushed 'em at the top of the

knoll and winged one bird. The rest of the covey flew into our barn-yard an' 'course he couldn't foller 'em in there."

"Gollies! Did you see him?"

"No, me an' Pa an' Anse was down at the back end of the place. Ma saw him, though, an' she told me all about it. Say, maybe I wasn't mad, but I got even, all right."

"Did you? How?"

Billy looked searchingly at his new friend. "I never told a soul how I did it, 'cept my chum, Maurice Keeler," he said. "But I'll tell you. That same evenin' I was prowlin' through the slashin' lookin' fer white grubs fer bass-bait. I fount a big rotten stump, so I pushed it over, an' right down under the roots I found an old weasel an' six half-grown kittens. Afore she could get over her surprise, I had her an' her family in the tin pail I had with me, an' the cover on. By rights I should a' killed the whole caboodle of 'em, I s'pose, 'cause they're mighty hard on the birds; but I had work fer 'em to do.

"That night I took them weasels over to Scraff's an' turned 'em loose under his barn. I knowed mighty well ma weasel would stay where it was dark an' safe and the chicken smell was so strong. Couple of days after that Scraff come over to our place to borrow some rat traps. His face was so long he was fair steppin' on his lower lip. He said weasels had been slaughterin' his Leghorns, right an' left; six first night an' nine the next.

"'I hope they won't get among my quail,' I says, an' Scraff he turned round an' looked at me mighty hard, but he didn't say nuthin'. He went away, grumblin', an' car-ryin' six of Dad's traps. Course I knowed he couldn't catch a weasel in a trap in twenty years an' he didn't catch any either. Ma weasel killed some more of his Leghorns, an' then Scraff he comes to me. 'Billy,' he says, 'is there

any way to get rid of weasels? ' ' Sure there's a way,' I says, ' but not everybody knows it.'

" ' I'll give you five dollars if you'll catch them weasels that are killin' my chickens,' he says.

" ' If you'll promise me you'll stay away from my quail an' partridge I'll catch 'em fer nuthin,' I told him. ' Only,' I says, ' remember, I do what I please with 'em, after I get 'em.' He looked at me as though he'd like to choke me, but he said all right, he'd leave my birds alone.

" That night Maurice Keeler an' me went over to Gamble's an' borrowed his old ferret. He's a big ferret an' he'll tackle anythin', even a skunk. With some keg-hoops an' a canvas sack we had made what we needed to catch the weasels in. Then we put a muzzle on the ferret, so he couldn't fang-cut the weasels, an' we went over to Scraff's. As soon as Joe Scraff saw the ferret he began to see light an' turned into the house to get his shotgun. I told him to remember his promise to let me get the weasels alive, so he set on the fence an' watched while we got busy.

" First off we plugged every hole under that barn but two, an' at each of these two we set a hoop-net. Then we turned ol' Lucifer, the ferret, loose under the barn. Holy Smoke! afore we knowed it there was high jinks goin' on under there. Maurice had hold of one hoop an' me the other. It took ma weasel an' her boys an' girls 'bout half a minute to make up their minds that ol' Lucifer wasn't payin' 'em a friendly visit. When the big scramble was over, I had a bagful of weasels an' so did Maurice. We let Lucifer prowls round a little longer to make sure we had all of 'em, then I called him out. I made Scraff give us one of his hens to feed the ferret on. Then Maurice an' me started off.

" ' You think you got all of 'em, Bill? ' Scraff called.

“ ‘ All this time,’ I says, an’ to save my life I couldn’t help laughin’ at the look on his face. He knowed right then that I had put up a job on him but he couldn’t figure out how.”

“ Oh Hully Gee! ” yelled Jim Scroggie, “ Wasn’t that corkin’ — Oh Mommer! An’ what did you an’ Maurice do with the weasels? ”

Billy grinned sheepishly. “ We should ’a killed ’em, I s’pose,” he said, “ but we took ’em down to the marsh an’ turned ’em loose there. Maurice said that anythin’ that had done the good work them weasels had, deserved life, an’ I thought so too.”

The twilight shadows were beginning to steal across the glade; the golden-rod of the uplands massed into indistinguishable clumps. The silence of eventide fell soft and sweet and songless — that breathless space between the forest day and darkness.

Billy stood up. “ You’ll like it here,” he said to the other boy who was watching him, a strange wonder in his eyes. “ After you know it better,” he added.

“ I’m afraid I don’t fit very well yet,” Scroggie answered. “ Maybe you’ll let me trail along with you sometimes, Bill, and learn things? ”

“ We’ll see,” said Billy and without another word turned to the dim pathway among the trees.

CHAPTER XII

OLD HARRY MAKES A FIND

Through the dusky twilight, soft with wood and dew and sweet with odor of ferns and wild flowers, Billy walked slowly. For the first time in long days his heart felt at peace. The canker of loneliness that had gnawed at his spirit was there no longer. It was a pretty good old world after all.

A whip-poor-will lilted its low call from a hazel copse and Billy answered it. A feeling that he wanted to visit his wild things in the upland shanty and explain to them his seeming neglect of them during his time of stress took possession of him. So, although he knew supper would be ready and waiting at home, he branched off where the path forked and hurried forward toward the oak ridge.

It was almost dark when he reached the little log sugar-shanty which housed his pets. He had hidden a lantern in a hollow log against such night visits as this and he paused to draw it out and light it before proceeding to the menagerie. As he rounded the shanty, whistling softly, and anticipating how glad Spotba, Moper, the owl, and all the other wild inmates would be to see him, he paused suddenly, and the whistle died on his lips. Somebody had been snooping about his menagerie! The prop had been taken from the door.

His mind traveled at once to Anse. So that meddler had been here and tried to let his pets free, had he? Apparently the chump didn't know they each had a separate cage, or if he did he hadn't the nerve to open it. Well,

it meant that Anse had that much more to settle for with him, that was all!

Billy put his hand on the latch of the door, then stood, frozen into inaction. From the interior of the shanty had come a groan — a human groan! Billy almost dropped the lantern. A cold shiver ran down his spine. His mind flashed to Old Scroggie's ghost. The hand that groped into his pocket in search of the rabbit-foot charm trembled so it could scarcely clasp that cherished object.

What would Trigger Finger do if placed in his position? Billy asked himself. There was only one answer to that. He took a long breath and, picking up a heavy club, swung the door open. The feeble rays of the lantern probed the gloom and something animate, between the cages, stirred and sat up.

“Harry!” gasped Billy, “Harry O'Dule!”

“Ha,” cried a quavering voice, “and is ut the Prince av Darkness, himself, as spakes t' me? Thin it's no fit av the delirium tremens I've had at all, at all, but dead I am and in purgatory! Oh weary me, oh weary me! Such shnakes and evil eyed burruuds have I never seen before. Och! could I be given wan taste av God's blissid air and sunshine ag'in, and never more would whiskey pass me lips.”

Spotba, the big mottled marsh snake, sensing Billy's presence, uncoiled himself and raised his head along the screen of his cage; the brown owl hooted a low welcome that died in a hiss as Harry groaned again.

“Merciful hivin! look at the eyes av that awful burrud,” he wailed. “And that big shnake hissin' his poison in me very face. Take me along, Divil, take me along,” he screamed. “It's no more av this I kin stand at all, at all.”

Billy hung the lantern on the door and bent above the

grovelling Harry. "Hey you," he said, giving the old man's shoulder a shake, "get up an' come out'a here; I'm not the devil, I'm Billy."

"Billy," Harry held his breath and blinked his red-rimmed eyes in unbelief. "Billy, ye say?" He got up with Billy's help and stood swaying unsteadily.

"You're drunk again!" said the boy, in deep disgust.

Harry wiped his lips on his sleeve and stood gazing fearfully about him. "Do you see the shnakes and the evil-eyed burruds, Billy Bye?" he shuddered. "It's see 'em ye shurely can and hear their divil hisses." His fingers gripped the boy's arm.

Billy shook him off. "Look here, Harry," he said, "You're seein' things. There ain't no snakes in here — no birds neither. You come along outside with me." He grasped the Irishman by the arm and started toward the door.

"Me jug," whispered Harry. "Where is that divil's halter av a jug, Billy?"

"There's your jug on its side," Billy touched the jug with his foot. "You must've drunk it empty, Harry."

"Faith, an' I did not. But ut's all the same, impty or full. Niver ag'in will ut lead me into delirium tremens, I promise ye that, although it's meself that knows where there's a plinty of whisky, so I do."

Billy led him outside and turned the light of the lantern full on his face. "Harry," he said, sternly, "where are you gettin' all this whisky?"

The old man started. "That's me own business," he answered shortly.

"Oh." Billy took hold of his arm, "Then them snakes an' man-eatin' birds you've been seein' are your own business, too; an' since you've been ninny enough to stray into

this shanty, I'm goin' to put you back in it an' see that you stay in it."

"And fer God's sake, why?" gasped the frightened O'Dule.

"That's my business," said Billy.

Harry glanced behind him with a shudder. "God love you fer a good lad, Billy," he cried; "but this is no way to trate an ould frind, is ut now?"

"Then you best tell me where you're gettin' the whisky," said Billy.

"But that's shure the ould man's secret, Billy," pleaded Harry. "It's not a foine chap as ye are would be wheedlin' it out av me, now?"

Billy frowned. "I know that Spencer won't give you any more whisky," he said, "an' I know the deacon won't give you any more cider. I know that you're gettin' liquor some place — an' without payin' fer it. Now you kin tell me where, er you kin stay in that shanty an' see snakes an' things all night."

Harry wavered. "And if I be tellin' ye," he compromised, "ye'll be givin' a promise not to pass it along, thin? Wull ye now?"

"Yes I promise not to tell anybody but Maurice?"

"Then I'll be tellin' ye where I do be gettin' the whisky, Billy; *where else but in the ha'nted house.*"

"What?" Billy could scarcely believe his ears.

"May I niver glimpse the blissid blue av Ireland's skies ag'in, if I spake a lie," said Harry, earnestly. "In the ha'nted house I found ut, Billy. Wait now, and I tell ye how ut so happened. Ye'll be rememberin' that night we tried to wait fer ould Scroggie's ghost an' the terrible storm come on and split us asunder wid a flash av blue lightnin'? I was crossin' meself in thankfulness that ut

found the big elm instead av me, I was, whin I dropped me fairy charm, d'ye moind? Stay and seek fer ut I would not, wid all the powers av darkness conspirin' wid ould Scroggie ag'in me. Ut's fly I did on the wings av terror to me own cabin, an' covered up me head wid the bed-quilt, I did."

"Well, go on. What's all this got to do with whisky?"

"Jest you wait a bit and you'll find that out. Nixt day I go down there ag'in to look fer me charm, but find ut I did not. Then wid me little jug in me hand and me whistle in me bosom, did I strike across woods to the Twin Oaks store, there to learn av the robbery. A little bit av drink did I get from Spencer, an' takin' ut home was I when an accident I had, an' spilled ut. Well, ut was afther several days av hard toil, wid not so much as a drop left in me little jug, that one mornin' as I was cuttin' through the lower valley fer Thompson's tater-patch, that come to me ut did I'd search a bit fer me lost charm ag'in.

"Ut was while pokin' about I was among the twigs on the ground, whisperin' a bit av witch-talk that belongs to me charm, that I discovered human foot-prints in the earth av the hollow. This I would not have thought strange a'tall a'tall, but the foot prints led right into the ha'nted grove. 'Begobs,' thinks I, 'no ghost iver wore boots the size av them now!' On me hands and knees I crawled forrard an' right in the edge av the grove I glimpsed somethin', I did, beneath the ferns, somethin' that sparkled in the mornin' light like a bit av star-dust on the edge av a cloud. Thinkin' only av me blessid charm, I crawled further in, and phwat do you suppose I picked up, Billy Bye? A bottle ut was, an' almost full av prime liquor.

"Sit I there, wid God's sunlight caressin' me bare head

and his burruuds trillin' their joy at me good luck — and dhrink I did. It's a mercy ut was but a small bottle, else I might have taken it back to me cabin to be finished at leisure. Instead, whin ut was all dhrunk up, I found widin me the courage to proceed further into the ha'nted grove. So I goes, an' afore I knew ut, right up to the ha'nted house I was, and inside ut."

Harry paused and sat looking away, a reminiscent smile on his face.

"What did you find there?" Billy's tone of impatience brought the old man out of his musing.

"Whisky," he answered solemnly, "two great jugs full av ut, Billy Bye."

"And what else?"

"Nothin' else," returned Harry. "Nuthin' else that mattered, Bye. A square box there was that I had no time to open a'tall; but whisky! Oh, Billy Bye — there ut was afore me, enough av ut to coax all the blood-suckin' bats and snakes in hades up to mock the consumer av ut."

Billy reached down and gripped the old man's arm. "You found that stuff and didn't so much as tell Spencer?" he cried indignantly.

"And fer why should I tell Spencer, thin?" Harry asked, his blood-shot eyes wide in wonder. "Nobuddy told me where to find ut, did they?"

"But Harry, don't you see, that stuff belongs to Caleb Spencer. The thieves must have hid it there, in the ha'nted house."

"Course they did," Harry agreed. "Ut's no fool you take me fer, shurely?"

"Then why didn't you tell Spencer? Don't you know them thieves will find out you've been there an' they'll hide that stuff in a new place, Harry?"

The old man laughed softly. "Wull they now? Well I guess they won't naither. It's hide ut in a new place I did, meself. They'll have a lot av trouble afindin' ut, too."

"Then," cried Billy, hotly, "you're as big a thief as they are."

"Hould on now!" Harry swayed up from the log, the grin gone from his face. "Ut's little did I think that Billy Wilson would be misunderstandin' me," he said, reproachfully. "Not wan article that the box contained has been teched by me. A small bit av the whisky have I took, because it was no more than sufficient reward fer me findin' the stuff, but the box is safe and safe ut wull be returned to Spencer whin the proper time comes."

"An' when'll that be, Harry?"

"Listen thin." Harry touched Billy's arm. "Ivery day since I made me discovery an' hid box and jugs in a new spot have I visited that sour-faced ould Spencer, and I've said: 'Supposin' one should discover your stolen goods, Caleb Spencer, would ye be willin' t' let what little whisky there was left go to the finder?'

"An' phwat has he said? 'Some av ut,' said he, when first I broached the question. And the nixt time I axed him he said, 'Half av ut.' Nixt time — only yesterday ut was — he said, 'Harry, I'd be givin' two-thirds av ut to the finder.'"

Harry laughed and again touched Billy's arm. "Tonight ut's go back to him I wull an' the question put to him once more, an' this night, plase God, he wull likely say, 'All av ut, Harry, all av ut.'"

Billy, who was thinking hard, looked up at this. "But," he said sternly, "you said, only a few minutes ago, that you were done forever with whisky."

“ And begobs I meant ut too,” cried Harry. “ When Caleb Spencer says, ‘ All av ut ’ to me, ut’s laugh at him I wull, and tell him it’s meself wants none av ut.”

Billy’s frown vanished. “ Fine, Harry, fine,” he commended, “ an’ I’ll go down to the store with you. Come up to the house, now, and I’ll manage to sneak you out some supper.”

“ Plase God,” murmured Harry, “ but ut’s meself ’ll be glad to lave this awful spot; lead on, Billy.”

“ Foller me then, an’ remember to keep quiet,” cautioned Billy.

“ But fer why should I keep quiet? Haven’t I thrown off the curse av rum? Why should I not shout the cry av victory, Billy?

“ Shout nuthin’; you keep still.”

“ But a small bit av a ehune, Billy. A bit av a lilt on me whistle, now.”

“ No. After I’ve got hold of our supper you kin lilt all you care to. Look here, Harry, you know jest how much use Ma has fer you; if she finds out you’re on our place, she’ll sick the dog on you. Now you do as I say.”

He took the path through the trees, Harry stumbling close behind, grumbling and protesting against the unkind fate that would not allow of his celebrating victory in a manner befitting a true son of Ireland. When, at length, they reached the edge of the wood, Billy stopped and pointed to a stump.

“ Set down there an’ keep still as a mouse till I get back,” he admonished. “ I won’t be long.”

“ But, Billy Bye, supposin’ the cold-eyed burruuds an’ the hissin’ serpents should be returnin’ to threaten me wance ag’in?”

Billy’s hand went down into his trouser’s pocket.

"Look," he comforted, "I've got my rabbit-foot charm, an' I'm goin' to draw a magic circle 'round the stump you're settin' on. No snakes, owl, ner even old Scroggie's ghost kin get inside that circle."

Harry held his breath and watched him, fascinated, as he proceeded to trace the ring.

"Fer the love av hivin, be sure ye make both inds av the circle jine," he shivered. "Ut's a small crack a ghost kin squeeze through, I'm tellin' ye."

"There you are, Harry." Billy, having completed the magic circle, stood up and put the charm back in his pocket. "Not a chink in it," he assured the old man.

"Faith," sighed Harry, "ut's meself is willin' to be riskin' a little in return fer a bite to eat, fer it's fastin' long I've been an' as impty as a church, I am."

"We'll fix that," Billy promised, as he slipped away through the darkness toward the light which glimmered through the trees.

CHAPTER XIII

ERIE OF THE LIGHT-HOUSE

Through the summer night, Hinter, astride a rangy roan, rode the ten mile trail that lay between the foot of Rond Eau and the light-house. On his left the giant pines stood with sharp points clearly defined against the starlight like the bayonet-fixed guns of a sleeping army; to his right swept dwarf cedars and stunted oaks and beyond them the bay marshes, with weaving fire-flies shimmering like star-dust close above them.

It was a lonely trail but Hinter had ridden it often. He knew that in the shadows lurked wild things which resented his intrusion of their retreat; that later, when the night grew old, timber-wolves would voice their protest, and fierce-eyed lynx, tufted ears flat and fangs bared in hatred, would look down upon him from overhanging branch of tree. But behind him stalked protection in the form of two great dogs against which no wolf or cat had ever waged successful warfare. Besides, there was the heavy "40-40" revolver in his belt.

"Two Great Danes and a 'bull-dog' should be protection enough for any man," he would laugh to Landon, the light-house keeper, when the latter shook his head doubtfully over Hinter's foolhardiness in riding this lone night trail. And Landon, whose asthma made talking difficult for him, would say no more, realizing that it was useless.

The light-house keeper, who lived with his daughter in a comfortable house on the extreme end of the Point, had always been glad to welcome Hinter to his isolated loneli-

ness. With an invalid's self-centeredness, he believed that it was to relieve the monotony of his existence that this man paid him periodical visits. He did not dream that his daughter, Erie, named after the lake, whose blue lay deep in her eyes and whose moods were of herself a part, was the real attraction which drew Hinter to their home. Indeed it would have taken a much more astute observer than the man who had been keeper of the light for more than thirty years to have observed this. Never by look, word or sign had Hinter shown that in this slender, golden-haired girl, whose laughter was the sweetest note in the world — this girl who could trim a sail in biting gale and swim the wide, deep channel when tempest angered it to clutching under-currents — was more to him than just a glad, natural product of her world. Always his manner towards her had been one of kindly respect. In time she grew ashamed of the distrust she had on first acquaintance intuitively felt for him. He was good to her father and considerate of her. He talked interestingly of the big outside world and described the cities he had visited. Her father liked him and always looked forward to his visits, and with a sick man's petulance grumbled if Hinter failed to come on his regular nights.

"He's a fine man, Erie," he would say to his daughter, "and well off, too. I'd like to see you married to a man like Hinter before I go. Ever since your Ma died, I've been worried about leavin' you behind."

"But I am going to marry Frank, Daddy," the girl would say softly.

"Hey? Oh, all right, all right. Stankope's a fine youngster, but poor, poor."

He would lapse into silence, sucking his pipe, and watching Erie putting away the supper-dishes.

"He'll never find the Scroggie will," he would speak again. "He'll always be poor."

"But, Daddy," the girl would laugh, "we love each other. We are happy and real happiness is worth more than money, isn't it, dear?"

"Aye," he would answer. "Your mother and I were happy in that way. But she was taken away and all I had in her place was heart loneliness — but for you." Then she would kiss him softly and, stealing about her household tasks, sing him to fitful sleep as she moved quietly about the room.

Tonight as Hinter rode through the pine-scented gloom the light-house keeper sat in his big chair beside the window that looked upon the lake. Spent from a trying fit of coughing, his nerves crying for the rest which was denied him, the sick man had gazed across to where the shuttle of sunset was weaving its fabric of changing colors upon sky and water. But he had not seen those glad lights; had not heard the cries of the haven-seeking gulls or the soft plaintive notes of the night birds from the Point forest. The lights had flashed and departed unseen, the wild calls had been voiced and sunk to silence unheard, because a tenderer light, which had belonged to this, his own hour, had vanished; a sweeter song than even night birds could voice had been stilled — the light in his Erie's eyes and the low notes from her glad heart.

He knew why. She had told him. God, Destiny, Fate, had come between her and the man she loved. The man had lost more than life in playing the part of a man. He was blind! Behind him were only memories that could not be buried. Before him only darkness, bleakness, despair. And he had done an heroic thing in giving her up. Helpless, powerless to support her, what else was

there for him to do? So, in his love for her, he had dug a grave and in it buried Hope and all that God in His wise ordinance had allowed him to live and feel. And they had kissed and parted, kneeling beside this grave, cold lips to cold lips, broken heart to broken heart. It was the kiss on the cross which each must carry.

So much had she told him, and the light had gone from her eyes, the song from her lips.

The sick man sank lower in his chair, his face working, his heart crying the same pleading cry as cried the heart of Rachel of old for her children — a cry understood only by the heart in which it was born — and God.

And so Hinter found him there before the window in the gloom, his thin hands clutching the arms of his chair, his white face sunk on his breast. "Landon, old friend, asleep?" he asked softly. No answer. Hinter struck a match and lit the lamp on the table. Then he touched the sleeper's arm; still he did not stir.

Alarmed, Hinter drew the big chair about so that the light would fall on the sick man's face. Slowly Landon opened his eyes. He struggled erect and attempted to speak, but a fit of coughing assailed him and robbed him of breath.

From his pocket Hinter drew a flat bottle and poured a portion of its contents into a glass. Gently raising the emaciated form to a more comfortable position, he held the glass to the blue lips. Under the stimulant of the brandy Landon rallied.

"Thanks," he whispered. Then, hospitality his first thought, he motioned towards a chair. Hinter sat down.

"Worse than usual tonight, isn't it?" he asked in kindly tones.

"Yes, asthma's that way — eases off — then comes back

— hits you sudden." He glanced at the bottle. Hinter, understanding, poured him out another portion.

"It seems to be the only thing that helps," gasped Landon as he swallowed the draught.

Hinter nodded. "Not a bad medicine if rightly used," he said. He filled his pipe, lit it, and passed the tobacco-pouch to Landon. He was watching the door leading to the inner room.

"Erie out in her boat?" he asked, casually. "I don't hear her voice, or her whistle."

"She's out on the bay," answered the father and lapsed again into brooding silence.

Hinter waited. At length Landon roused from his musings. "My heart's heavy for her," he said, "and heavy for the young man who loves her. You've heard, of course. News of the like spreads quickly."

"Yes, I've heard." Hinter rose abruptly and strode to the window overlooking the bay. A full moon was lifting above the pines. In its silvery track a tiny sail was beating harborward.

After a time he turned and walked back slowly to where the sick man sat. "Mr. Landon," he said, gravely, "I love your daughter. With your permission I would make her my wife. Wait," as the older man attempted to speak. "Hear what I have to say. I have endeavored to be honorable. Never by word or look have I given her to understand what my feelings are toward her. For Stanhope, the man who was brave and strong enough to give her up, I have always had the deepest respect; and now, knowing the price he has paid, I honor him. He was far more worthy of your daughter than I am. But now, as all is over between them, I would do my best to make her happy."

"That I know well," spoke the father eagerly. "Ever

since my clutch on life has been weakenin' I've worried at the thought that perhaps I may leave her unprovided for. You have lifted the load, my friend. I will speak to Erie and place your proposal of marriage before her. She's a good girl; she'll be guided by her father in the matter."

Hinter gravely thanked him. "I would advise that you say nothing for a time," he said. "She is high-spirited, loyal to the core. She is suffering. Time will assist us; we will wait. I shall visit you oftener than heretofore, but until I think the moment expedient say nothing to her."

A light step sounded on the gravel; the door opened and Erie entered. She was dressed in white. The damp bay-breeze had kissed the golden hair to shimmering life but there were shadows beneath the violet eyes, a dreary pathos about the unsmiling mouth.

She placed a cold little hand in the eager one which Hinter extended to her and her fleeting glance left him to fasten on the sick man in the arm chair.

"Daddy," she cried, running over to kneel beside him. "It was selfish of me to leave you alone."

"I've had our good friend Hinter for company, girly," said her father, stroking the damp curls.

Erie flashed their visitor a look of gratitude. "It is good of you to come to him," she said. "He always looks forward to your visits, and grows quite fretful if you are late." She smiled and patted the father's hand. "The east wind's bad for the cough but tomorrow you'll be as good as ever, won't you, Daddy?"

Landon did not reply. He simply pressed the girl's cold hand. Hinter caught the look of suffering in her eyes as she arose and passed into the outer room. When she returned she carried a heavy, wicker-bound can.

"My lamps need filling," she explained. "No, please

don't come," as Hinter made to take the can from her, "I would rather you stayed with him."

He bowed, and his eyes followed her from the room. "What a wonderful creature she is," he thought.

"Hinter," Landon's weak voice broke in on his thoughts, "you haven't given me the neighborhood news. Have they found out who robbed the store yet?"

"No," answered Hinter, resuming his seat, "I believe not. Some were disposed to think that the shoremen had a hand in the robbery but I don't think so."

"Why don't you? The Sand-sharkers aren't above doin' it, are they?"

"Well, I don't say that they are. That job was not done by any amateurs, though. The men who broke into Spencer's store were old hands at the game. I was at the store and had a look over it. I've seen the work of professional burglars before. These fellows made a clean sweep and left not a single clew. Still, I made my own deductions. I can't tell you more until I have proved my suspicions correct. Hush!" he warned, "she's coming. I must be hitting the trail for the Settlement."

As Hinter picked up his hat Erie entered and the light words he was about to speak died on his lips at sight of the girl's stricken face. "You are tired," he said, in deep concern. "The work of tending the lights alone is too much for you. Why not let me send someone from the Settlement to help you, at least until your father is strong enough to take up his end of the work again?"

She shook her head. "The work is not hard and I love it," she answered. "After the lights are lit I have nothing to do. Daddy's asthma will not let him sleep, so he sits in his big chair all night and keeps his eye on the light while I sleep. Then when the sun sucks up the mists from bay

and lake he is able to get his sleep. So, you see," smiling bravely, "we get along splendidly."

Hinter held out his hand. "Well, good night Miss Erie," he said. "I'll be up again soon, with some books for you."

"But you mustn't go without having a cup of tea and a bite to eat," she protested. "Please sit down and I'll have it ready in a minute."

He shook his head. "Not tonight, thanks. You're tired, and I've a long ride before me. Next time I come we'll have tea," he promised as he turned to shake hands with Landon.

"Your guardians are with you I suppose?" said Erie, as he turned to go.

He laughed, "Sphinx and Dexter, you mean? Yes, they are out in the stable with my horse. By the way, they didn't see you last time we were here, and they seemed to feel pretty badly about it. Would you mind stepping outside and speaking a word to them?" he asked. "They are very fond of you, you know."

She shivered. "And I'm very fond of them, only," she added as she followed him to the door, "I never know whether they want to eat me up or caress me."

"You won't forget to come back again soon, Hinter?" called the sick man. "It does me a sight of good to see you and get the news from the Settlement."

"I'll return soon," Hinter promised. "Don't worry about anything. A speedy recovery — and good night."

A full moon was veiling lake and bay in sheen of silvery whiteness as Hinter and Erie went out into the August night. Eastward the long pine covered Point swept a dark line against the grey, shadowy rush-lands. Somewhere among the hidden ponds mallards and grey ducks were quacking contentedly as they fed. A swamp coon raised his almost human cry as he crept the sandy shores in search

of the frogs whose tanging notes boomed from the boglands.

Man and girl paused for a little time on the strip of white sand to drink in the beauty of the night and the sounds of its wild life. Then Hinter stepped to the stable and opened the door. "Come boys," he commanded and the two great dogs came bounding out to leap upon him with whines of welcome, then on to where the girl stood, waiting, half eagerly, half frightened.

"Gently now," Hinter cautioned, and they threw themselves at her feet, massive heads on outstretched paws, deep-set eyes raised to her face. She bent and placed a hand on the head of each.

"Surely," she said, "they are not as ferocious as they are said to be?"

Hinter knit his brows. "I'm afraid they are," he answered. "But my friends are their friends, you see. There is only one other person besides yourself and myself who can do what you are doing now, though."

She looked up quickly. "And may I ask who that is?"

"Certainly; it's young Billy Wilson. You know—the lad who is always roaming the woods."

"Yes," she said softly. "I know him perhaps better than most folks do. I am not surprised that he can handle these dogs, Mr. Hinter."

He glanced at her closely, struck by the odd note in her voice. "He seems a manly little chap," he said. "I must get to know him better."

"You may succeed," she replied, "but I'm afraid you would have to know Billy a long time to know him well."

She bent and gave the dogs a farewell pat; then moved like the spirit of the moonlight to the house. "Good night," she called softly from the doorway.

"Good night," he echoed.

Five minutes later he was riding the two-mile strip of sand between the light-house and the pines, the Great Danes close behind. When he reached the timber he reined in to look back over his shoulder at the tall white tower with its ever-sweeping, glowing eye. Then, with a sigh, he rode forward and passed into the darkness of the trees. Half way down the trail he dismounted and, after hitching his horse to a tree and commanding his dogs to stand guard, plunged into the thickly-growing pines on the right of the path.

Half an hour later he came out upon the lake shore. Quickly he scraped together a pile of drift wood. He applied a match to it and as fire leaped up stood frowning across the water. Then, as an answering light flashed from some distance out in the lake, he sighed in relief and seating himself on the sand lit his pipe. After a time the sound of oars fell on his ears. A boat scraped on the beach. Two men stepped from it and approached the fire.

CHAPTER XIV

OLD HARRY TURNS A TRICK

Maurice Keeler, wan, hollow-eyed, and miserable, was seated on a stool just outside the door in the early morning sunlight. Near him sat his mother, peeling potatoes, her portly form obscured by a trailing wistaria vine. What Maurice had endured during his two weeks with the measles nobody knew but himself. His days had been lonely, filled with remorse that he had ever been born to give people trouble and care; his nights longer even than the days. Hideous nightmares had robbed him of slumber. Old Scroggie's ghost had visited him almost nightly. The Twin Oaks robbers, ugly, hairy giants armed with red-hot pitch-forks, had bound him to a tree and applied fire to his feet. What use to struggle or cry aloud for help? Even Billy, his dearest chum, had sat and laughed with all the mouths of his eight heads at his pain. Of course he had awakened to learn these were but dreams; but to a boy dreams are closely akin to reality.

And now, after days of loneliness and nights of terror, Maurice was up again and outside where he could catch the wood-breeze and smell the sweet odor of plants and clearing fires. He wondered how many years he had been away from it all. How old was he now? Why didn't his mother answer his questions? He did not realize that his voice was weak; he had forgotten that his mother was deaf. All he knew was that nobody cared a hang for him any more, not even his own mother. His weak hands clutched at the bandage at his throat, as though to tear it off and hurl it

from him. His head sank weakly back against the wall, and the tears came to his eyes.

Suddenly those eyes opened wide. Was he dreaming again or did he hear the low croak of a crow? He twisted his head. There at his feet sat Croaker. The crow's beady eyes were fastened on him. Suspended from its neck was a cord and attached to the cord was a piece of yellow wrapping paper.

Maurice's white face slowly expanded in a grin. He glanced in the direction of his mother, then held out his hand to the crow with a lowspoken, "Come Croaker, ol' feller."

But Croaker shook his head and backed away, emitting a string of unintelligible utterances.

"Come Croaker," pleaded Maurice again. But the crow was obdurate. It is barely possible that he failed to recognize Maurice owing to the sick boy's altered looks or perhaps he expected a glimpse of the reward which was always his for the performing of a service. With one backward look from his bright eyes, he spread his short wings and sailed across to Mrs. Keeler, settling on her shoulder with a harsh croak, whereat that greatly-startled lady sat down on the gravel, her lap full of dirty water and potatoes.

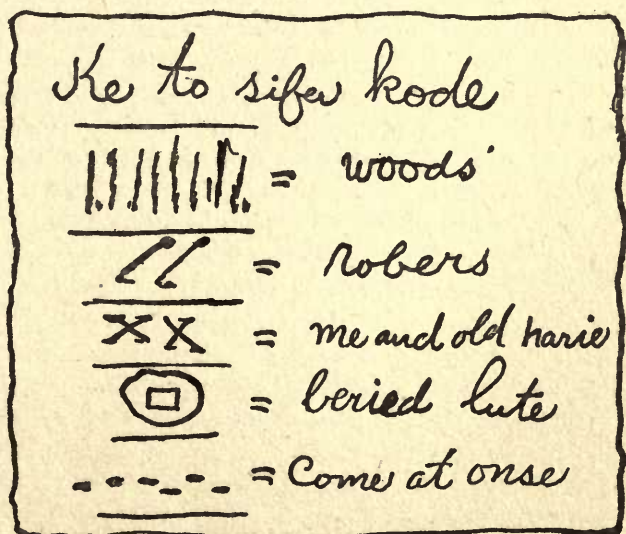
What Mrs. Keeler might have done is not known, for just at this juncture a high-pitched voice came to her from the garden gate. "Get hold of him, Missus Keeler an' wring his black neck."

Mrs. Keeler, who heard the voice without catching Mrs. Wilson's words, struggled up. Croaker promptly sailed over to Maurice for protection. The boy broke the string attached to the note from Billy and reaching behind him secured from a plate a scrap of the dinner he had left uneaten. "Here Croaker," he whispered, "grab it quick.

Now, back you go where things are safe," and he tossed the bird into the air. Croaker flew to a tree-top and proceeded to enjoy the reward of service well rendered.

Maurice glanced at the message, then his face fell. "Oh blame it all!" he muttered, "another of Bill's sign letters; looks like a fence that's been struck by lightnin'."

The several long perpendicular lines were possibly intended to represent the forest, but what was meant by the two vertical lines and the crosses directly beneath them Maurice did not know. Also there was a crudely drawn circle and, inside it, a small square. Maybe this was supposed to represent a hollow stump with a squirrel-trap in it, thought the perplexed Maurice. With a sigh of disgust he turned the paper over. Then his eyes brightened. Written there in Billy's cramped hand were these words and characters:



Maurice stared. So that was it! Billy and old Harry had found the goods stolen from the Twin Oaks store. There were doin's — big doin's, and Billy wanted him in on 'em. He leaned over to secure a view of his mother and Mrs. Wilson. Mrs. Keeler had removed her wet apron and was now seated on the bench beside her neighbor, listening to the latest gossip.

"That Jim Scroggie, the heir, has come back, an' he's rented the Stanley house," Mrs. Wilson was saying. "They say he's goin' to cut down the big woods an' sell the timber. I guess he intends stayin' right on, 'cause he brought his housekeeper an' his two children, a boy and a girl, with him."

"Is he tol'able well-to-do?" Mrs. Keeler asked.

"Why yes. I understand he's rich as porcupine stew," said Mrs. Wilson. "What he wants to come here fer, stirrin' up trouble, is beyond all knowin'. Him an' that man Hinter — they've been trampin' all over the country examin'in' the land, ericks an' everythin'. They met up with my man, Tom, on the road yesterday an' they stopped him. Scroggie told him any time he wanted to bore fer water he'd put in a rig an' Tom needn't pay a cent if he didn't get him a well."

"Land o' Liberty! but he was generous!" cried Mrs. Keeler.

"Tom said he'd think it over an' let him know. I guess he was pretty short with Scroggie, knowin' as he does that the woods an' land rightly belong to young Stanhope."

"That it does," agreed Mrs. Keeler, indignantly. "An' him, poor young man, helpless through loss of his eyesight and all. You heard, of course, that Frank Stanhope and Erie Landon had broke their engagement?"

"Yes, everybody who knows 'em both an' loves 'em both

has heard that. But what else could they do? He's not able to support a wife—the little farm is only enough fer himself, after that Burke an' his wife are paid fer workin' it and lookin' after the house, an' he's too high-spirited to ask Erie to share his burden and poverty."

Mrs. Keeler gulped and reached for her apron but recollecting that she had hung it up to dry, rubbed her eyes on her sleeve. "Cobin says that young man is jest about heartbroke, spite o' the smile he wears," she said. "Tries so hard to be cheerful, too, in spite of all. Preacher Reddick had supper with us last Sunday night an' he said the teacher was the finest specimen of Christly example he'd ever seen."

Mrs. Wilson cleared her throat. "They do say that Mr. Hinter visits the light-house regular every week. Have you heard that, Missus Keeler?"

"Yes, an' I'm wonderin' why?"

Mrs. Wilson rose and smoothed down her skirt. "Well I wouldn't go so far as to say I know why, but I have my suspicions," she declared. "One thing I do know, it's not 'cause he's so interested in a man sick with the asthma."

Mrs. Keeler looked at her sagely. "Erie would never marry any man like Hinter," she asserted.

"You can't tell what a girl 'll do fer her father," said the other woman dubiously. "But there now," she broke off, "here I am visitin' away with you, jest as though there wasn't a batch of bread riz and kneaded at home, ready fer the oven. When I looked fer my bread-pans blest a one could I find. I know that Billy has lugged 'em off somewheres to use as bath-tubs fer his birds and lizards; so, thinks I, I'll jest run over an' ask Mrs. Keeler fer the loan of hern."

"Why to be sure," rejoined her neighbor, "come right

along in an' I'll get 'em. I want you to see how nice my canned tomaters look." As they turned towards the house, Mrs. Wilson caught sight of Maurice, huddled in the big chair beneath the trailing vine.

"Well, fer the land sakes alive, Maurice!" she cried. "It is good to see you up ag'in. You've had a hard pull of it, poor lad. Dear heart! but it's thinned you a lot, too! Think of any mortal boy changin' so in two short weeks."

Maurice squirmed. "It seemed a lot longer than two weeks," he said faintly.

"There, there," cried the big-hearted woman, "of course it did."

Mrs. Keeler edged forward distrustfully. "What's that he says he's goin' to do in two weeks?" she asked, suspicion in her tones. "Cause if you think, young man, you be goin' to go in swimmin' ag'in, inside two weeks—" she pointedly addressed Maurice, "you got another think comin'. I'm goin' to see that you don't suffer no re-lapse."

"I don't want to go swimmin'" wailed Maurice, "but I do want'a walk a bit out through the woods, Ma."

"No." Mrs. Keeler shook her head with finality, "I can't trust you out o' my sight. You gotta set right there where you be."

"She don't know how awful lonesome it is settin' still so long," sighed Maurice, casting an appealing eye on Billy's mother. "I wisht you'd ask her to let me go as far as your place with you, Missus Wilson," he pleaded, lowering his voice. "Billy kin trail 'long back with me an' see I don't cut up any."

"Maurice," remonstrated Mrs. Wilson, smothering the sympathy in her heart in the clutch of duty, "it's wrong fer you to take advantage of your pore ma's deafness this way. I wouldn't send Willium back with you, anyways."

What devilment you wouldn't think of he certainly would. No, I'll ask your ma to let you come, but it's Anson I'll have bring you home an' not Willium." And with a frown and a shake of her head she followed her neighbor into the house.

Maurice waited hopefully until his mother and Mrs. Wilson came out again. Then he turned eagerly towards them.

"Your Ma says you kin come," said Mrs. Wilson, "Providin' I don't let you near the cookie jar, and see that Anson brings you back safe."

"Mind you," his mother admonished as he followed Mrs. Wilson down the path, "if you come home with wet feet into bed you go and stay 'till snow flies."

When they reached the meadow-path, with the outbuildings between them and the watchful eyes of his mother, Maurice removed the shawl from about his throat. "I won't be needin' it any more, now," he said in answer to his companion's frown of protest. "It makes me too warm, an' the doctor he said whatever I did I mustn't sweat." Mrs. Wilson allowed the explanation to stand.

They climbed the rail fence and started to cross the stubble-field. As they neared the long row of brown-fruited sumachs Mrs. Wilson paused and stood in a listening attitude. "Say, isn't that Willium's varmint of a crow settin' up there on that ash?" she asked, pointing to the slender tree growing among the sumachs.

Maurice shook his head. "No ma'am, that ain't him," he said. "It's too big fer Croaker; it's a wild crow."

"Is it?" The woman started on again, then halted abruptly. "Well, it's queer how much his voice is like Willium's crow. Can't you hear him mutterin' and croakin'?"

"Yep, I hear him, but all crows do that," Maurice hastened to explain. Then as a shrill note, half a cluck and half a whistle, sounded from the bushes, he added quickly. "That's a hen partridge callin'. That erow's tryin' to scare her off her nest, most like, so's ~~he kin~~ steal the eggs."

Again came the low whistle, and Maurice swayed, staggered and sank down on the stubble, with a faint moan. With a cry of alarm Mrs. Wilson bent above him. "Maurice! Maurice Keeler!" she gasped. "Whatever is wrong? There now, I knowed you was up and out too soon. Come along. I'm goin' to take you straight back home."

"Oh please don't do that," begged Maurice. "I'm jest a little weak, that 's all. You leave me here an' send Anse back to stay with me. I do so want to go over in the woods fer a little while, Missus Wilson."

The woman stood frowning and considering. "Well," she said at length. "I'll go an' have Anson come fer you but you see you don't budge an inch till he comes."

"No ma'am, he'll find me right here."

Maurice watched her until she climbed the road fence and entered the grove inside the Wilson gate. Then he started crawling towards the sumachs. As he reached them Billy poked his head from the bushes, a grin on his face.

"Have hard work gettin' away from her, Maurice?" he asked.

"Not very. Gee! Bill, it's good to see you ag'in."

"It's good to see you too, Maurice. You got my code message, didn't you?"

"Yep. Have you found the stuff they stole from the store, Bill?"

"You bet. Me an' old Harry know right where it is."

We ain't told another soul but you and teacher Stanhope 'bout it yet, but we're goin' to soon. Come on an' I'll show you where it's buried."

"I can't," said Maurice miserably. "Your Ma's goin' to send Anse out to keep tabs on me. If he wasn't such a tattletale we might work it but you know him."

Billy pursed up his lips in thought. "Say!" he cried, "I've got it. You go on back there where you played possum, an' wait fer Anse. When he comes he's goin' to beg a favor of you, sure as shootin'. He played a dirty trick on me not long ago an' he's been keepin' out of my way ever since. Lied to me so's to get me to thrash a feller that licked him. I'll tell you all about it later. Anse is goin' to ask you to square it with me; he's jest that kind. You promise to get him off this time if he goes away an' leaves you by yourself. Then you come back here, see?"

"Yes, but if he goes an' tells your Ma, what then?"

"But he won't. If he does she'll tan him good fer goin' off an' leavin' you by yourself. You tell him he'll have to wait around here till you get back. He'll do it, all right. There he comes through the grove now. Better crawl back to where Ma left you."

Maurice dropped on all fours and started wriggling through the rough stubble, sighing in relief as he reached the desired spot.

Anson was grinning as he came up. "Kind 'a weak on the pins, eh?" he greeted, "Ma told me I was to come across here an' see you didn't get into no mischief."

Maurice wanted to knock that grin off Anson's sneering mouth, but he was in no condition to do it. Besides it was a moment for diplomacy. "Everybody seems to think I want 'a fall in a well an' get drowned, er somethin'," he grumbled. "Why do I need watchin', I'd like to know?"

Anson chuckled, "Well, you ain't goin' to get no chance to do any funny stunts this afternoon," he promised. "I'm here to keep an eye on you."

"Which one?" Maurice asked sarcastically. "The good one er the blacked one?"

Anson's face reddened. "You needn't get funny!" he cried, angrily. "Any feller's liable to black an eye runnin' agin a tree, in the dark."

"Or a fist in the daylight," grinned Maurice. "Well, never mind, Anse," he said consolingly, "you've got one good eye left, but somethin' tells me you won't have it long."

"What you mean?" asked Anson suspiciously.

"Why, I've got a hunch that somebody's layin' for you, that's all," answered Maurice. "'Course, I may be wrong. Am I?"

Anson squatted down beside Maurice. "No, by gosh! you're not so far wrong," he admitted, ruefully. "Somebody is layin' fer me, an' layin' fer me right. It's Bill. Say, Maurice, won't you try an' get him to let me off this time. If you will I won't ferget it in a hurry."

Maurice stood up. "Where's Bill now?" he asked.

"I dunno. Down where he keeps his pets I s'pose. Why?"

"Cause I'm goin' down an' find him. I'll beg you off this time, Anse, if you'll do as I say."

"What you mean, do as you say?"

"You're to stay here till I get back, no matter how long I'm away."

Anson considered. "An' you promise to get Bill to let me off?"

"Sure."

"All right, I'll stay."

“Course, if you ain’t here when I get back the bargain’s off. Understand?”

Anson nodded. “I’ll be here,” he promised.

“Bill won’t bother you none if you do what I say,” said Maurice as he made for the grove. Half an hour later he and Billy approached old Harry’s hut and knocked gently on the door. Harry’s voice bade them enter.

They found him seated on a stool, fondling the big grey-blue cat. He placed the cat gently down as they entered.

“God love ye, byes,” he cried, “it’s a foine pair ye are, an’ no mistake; so it’s sick y’ve been, Maurice?”

“Measles,” said Maurice.

Harry nodded sympathetically. “Faith, measles are a blissin’ in disguise, as are many other afflictions,” he said. “Would ye relish a swate smell and the colors av God’s big out av doors so much, think ye, if kept prisoner from thim ye never were? I’m thinkin’ not.

“Take meself,” he went on, drawing his stool closer to the chairs of his young friends. “All me life have I dhrunk more er less av the cup that cheers; but I’m through now, byes, not so much either because ut’s a fit av the blue divils the stuff give me but because I mane from now on to quaff the swate draft of Nature widout a bad taste in me mouth. I’m through wid whisky feriver, and ut’s Harry O’Dule, siventh son av a siventh son, so declares himself this day. Ut’s out into God’s blissid sunlight have I come afther bein’ held prisoner by a deadlier disease than measles, me byes.”

The tears came to the old man’s eyes as he felt the sincere pressure of the hands held out to him. “Begobs! but ut’s a foine pair ye be,” he muttered. Then aloud. “And have ye told him, Billy?”

Billy nodded.

"Well, this much more I'll be tellin' both av ye," said Harry. "Just a bit ago two strange min stopped at me cabin dure. A rough lookin' pair they were, I'm sayin'. Says the big one av the two: 'Ould man,' says he, 'do ye know wan in these parts named Hinter?' "

" 'I know one such,' " sez I.

" 'Then,' sez he, 'wull yu do me the favor av deliverin' a missage to him an' kin ye go now?' says he.

" 'I kin that,' says I."

" 'And the message,' he says, 'this is ut: "Off Gibson's Grove at tin o'clock," ' says he."

" 'All right,' says I, and he put a silver dollar in me fist and wint away wid his companion.

"I delivered the missage to Hinter. And whin I returned to me cabin I found everythin' in a jumble, an' no mistake. Somebody had scattered the furs on me bunk and turned everythin' upside down, they had, an' they had sought underneath the flure, too."

"An' did they find it?" gasped Billy.

"Begobs they did not," grinned Harry. "And I'll be tellin' ye fer why. Only this blissid mornin', uts took the stuff from beneath me flure, I did, and hid it in a new spot."

Billy sighed his relief. "Gee, but it's lucky you did," he cried. "That's the very thing Trigger Finger Tim would a' done, ain't it, Maurice?"

Maurice nodded. "I'm goin' to stick along here an help you watch the stuff, Harry. Them men 'll likely come prowlin' back here."

"An' torture you, Harry," put in Billy. "Tie you to a tree an' throw knives at you till you weaken an' tell 'em where the stuff's hid. That's what they did to Trigger Finger."

"Faith," cried Harry, "ut's divil a bit I know concernin' that man Trigger Finger, but ut's small reward they'd be gettin' fer their pains if they tied me up and tried torture, an' I'll be tellin' ye fer why, byes. The stuff's gone back to Spencer. Load ut I did meself on Joe Scraff's buckboard, not more than an hour ago. The box wid the black fox skins an' two big jugs av whisky. Back I sent ut all, byes, wid the compliments av the both av ye an' me poor self. But now it'll be there, and the heart av ould Caleb 'll be beatin' two skips fer one wid jye at recoverin' all av his stolen possessions. I did right, I hope now, in sindin' ut along back?" he finished.

"You bet you did!" cried the boys, together.

Maurice stood up. "Well, as there's no need to keep watch here, maybe I best trail along home. Anse'll be gettin' tired waitin' fer me."

"That won't hurt him; he's always tired anyway," rejoined Billy. "But we'd best go."

At the door he paused and turned toward Harry. "Where's Gibson's Grove?" he asked.

Harry, who had picked up his hat and taken his tin whistle from his bosom, shook his head. "There's no sech place, I'm thinkin'," he answered.

Billy frowned. "What did Hinter say when you gave him the message, Harry?"

Harry chuckled. "Faith, ut's crazy he thought I was I guess," he cried. "'Ould man,' sez he, 'somebody has been playin' a trick on ye. I know no such place as Gibson's Grove.' Thin begobs! he laughed, like he saw the humor av ut, and had me sate meself in the shade and smoke a eigar while I risted. So I'm thinkin', byes, them min jest wanted to get rid av me the while they ransacked me house and belongin's, bad cess to 'em!"

Billy laughed. "Come along as far as the clearin' Harry," he invited, "and play us a tune that'll cheer Maurice up, will you?"

"Faith, an' that I'll do," cried O'Dule. "Lilt him a chune I wull that'll make his laggin' feet dance, and his laggin' spirit look up above the slough av despond."

And so down the path ridged with the bronze bars of late afternoon sunlight, they passed, Harry strutting in the lead, wrinkled face lifted, scanty white locks streaming in the breeze as he drew from his whistle a wild sweet melody.

"There now," he cried, when at last the clearing was reached, and the whistle was tucked away in the bosom of his flannel shirt, "I'll be partin' wid ye now, byes, fer a spell. Over to Spencer's store I'll be goin', to glimpse the jye in his eyes, and axe him to trust me fer a few groceries I'll be needin' till me next allowance arrives from the home land. And ut's no doubt I have in me mind that he'll do ut gladly, fer ut's a tinder man he is at heart an' no mistake."

CHAPTER XV

BILLY'S PROBLEMS MULTIPLY

Recovery of the stolen goods caused considerable excitement in the Settlement. For a week or so nothing else was talked of and conjecture ran rife as to why the thieves had not made off with their pillage rather than hide it in the haunted house. Harry O'Dule came in for a plenty of praise for the part he had played in finding the loot but beyond hinting that the job had been more than easy for the seventh son of a seventh son, he was reticent on the subject. That he should have returned the liquor almost intact, to the owner, was a conundrum to all who knew him, with the exception of Billy and Maurice.

Billy was anything but easy in his mind during these exciting days. Who were the two strangers who had searched old Harry's hut? Were they the same two he and Maurice had seen in the woods on the night of the storm? If so, why did they send a message to Hinter, and what was its significance? Where was Gibson's Grove, anyway? These questions bothered him, and pondering upon them robbed him of appetite and sleep. Maurice and Elgin were no help to him in a dilemma of this kind and the new boy, Jim Scroggie, he knew scarcely well enough to trust.

It was, perhaps, just as well for Anson that he kept out of Billy's way during this period. However very little that Billy did was missed by his pale blue eyes. He knew that his step-brother had visited the haunted house alone and had searched it nook and corner. For what? He had seen

him fasten his rabbit-foot to a branch of a tree and dig, and dig. For what? He wanted to find out but dared not ask. Perhaps Billy was going crazy! He acted like it. Anson made up his mind that he would confide his suspicions in his mother. But on the very day that he had decided to pour into Mrs. Wilson's ear all the strange goings-on of his brother, Billy caught him out on a forest-path alone and, gripping him by the shoulder, threatened to conjure up by means of witchcraft at his command a seven-headed dragon with cat-fish hooks for claws who would rip his — Anson's — soul to shreds if he so much as breathed to his mother one word of what he had seen.

In vain Anson declared he didn't know anything to tell. Billy looked at him calmly. "You been follerin' me an' I know it," he said. "Croaker saw you, an' so did Ringdo."

Anson's mouth fell open in terror. "You don't mean—" he commenced, then gulped, unable to proceed.

"That Croaker's a witch? Of course he's a witch, an' so's Ringdo. They both know exactly what you're thinkin', an' what you're doin'. Listen, you," as Anse shivered. "Didn't you dream, jest t'other night, that Croaker was bendin' over you to peck your eyes out?"

Anse nodded a reluctant admission.

"Well, s'pose it wasn't any dream? S'pose it was all real? An' s'pose, if I hadn't waked up in time to stop him, he'd have picked your eyes out an' put in fisheyes in their place? Then you couldn't see anythin' unless you was under water. An' s'pose, when I asked Croaker what he wanted to do that awful thing fer, he up an' told me that you'd been spyin' on me an' you didn't deserve to own human eyes? I say s'pose all this. Now then, Anse, you best mind your own business an' let your mouth freeze up close, else you're goin' to have an awful time of it. If

I get Croaker to say he won't gouge your eyes out till I give the word it's more'n you deserve."

Hope stirred in Anson's fear ridden soul—hope which Billy remorselessly killed with his next words.

"But I couldn't get no promise out 'o Ringdo. He says you're workin' 'gainst us."

"But I ain't, Bill. Cross my heart, I ain't," protested Anson. "Why should I be?"

"Maybe jest 'cause you're a sneak," Billy answered, "but you're my brother an' I don't want anythin' horrible to happen to you if I kin help it. The best thing fer you to do is keep mum, an' when you see me strikin' off anywhere look t'other way."

"An' you'll see that Ringdo don't bite me, Bill?" pleaded Anson. "You'll keep him off me, won't you?"

Billy considered, "I'll try," he promised, "but it's goin' to take a whole lot of coaxin' to do it. That old witchcoon has been prowlin' down through the tamarack swale huntin' copperhead snakes for a week now, gettin' ready to do fer somebody er other."

"Oh gollies!" gasped Anson. "What's he huntin' copperheads fer, Bill?"

"Why to poison his teeth with. He's loadin' up fer somebody, sure as shootin'. Gosh! I am sorry you've been sech a fool, Anse. Jest think, one little scratch from that coon's teeth and —"

"Bill," Anson's voice was husky with terror. "You won't let him touch me, will you, Bill?"

"I'll keep him away from you so long as you keep away from us, an' hold a close tongue in your head," Billy promised. "Understan', though, it's goin' to be a mighty hard thing to do; I saw him trying the bark of that elm jest under our winder only this mornin'. He's likely aimin' to

shin up that tree an' fall on your face, most any night, so if you want your eyes an' your life you'd better do what I say."

"I'll do jest as you say, Bill," Anse promised, fervently, and Billy knew that he meant it. "All right, that's a go," he said and went off to the menagerie to feed his pets.

* * * * *

Something else was to happen shortly to make Billy feel that his world was full of mysterious agents sent for no other purpose than to give him fresh worries.

That evening, as he drove the cattle down along the Causeway for water he met two teams of horses hauling loads of greasy-looking timbers and black, oily pipes. The men who drove the teams were strangers to him. Scroggie, or Heir Scroggie, as he was now commonly called in the neighborhood, sat beside the driver of one of the wagons.

"He's movin' a saw-mill up into the big woods," thought Billy. "But where in the world did it come from?" he pondered as he looked after the creaking loads.

He was not long to remain in doubt on that point. As he approached the lake road another load of timbers and metal rounded the corner. Two men were seated on the load, a big, broad-shouldered man and a thin one. Some little distance behind another man was walking. It was Hinter.

As the load drew close to where Billy stood partly concealed by a clump of red willows, the driver halted his team for a rest after the pull through the heavy sand, and apparently not noticing the boy, spoke in guarded tones to his companion.

"If I had only listened to you, Jack, we wouldn't have lost that whisky," he said. "I was dead sure nobody would

go near that place. And at that we didn't find what we did the job to get, did we? It'll be just our luck to have that will turn up in time to cook our goose, yet."

"Well, Tom, I reckon it's none of our funeral whether it turns up or not," growled the other. "We're gettin' paid well fer what we're doin', ain't we? If it turns up, Scroggie and the boss 'll have to do their own worryin'."

The driver cracked his whip and the load went on, swaying and creaking as it left the soft sand for the corduroy.

A little further on Billy came face to face with Hinter. "How are you, Billy?" spoke the man, pleasantly. "Still driving the cows down to the lake for water, I see."

"Yep; they don't seem to take to the crick water," Billy replied. "It's sort of scummy an' smells queer."

Hinter laughed constrainedly. "I've been pretty well through the Settlement, and most of the creeks are like that," he replied. "What do you suppose causes that scum and that peculiar odor?" he asked, casually.

The boy shook his head. "I dunno; them cricks shouldn't be that way; they're all spring-fed. Maybe you know?" looking straight into Hinter's eyes.

"No," said Hinter, startled at the directness of look and question. "I don't know."

He turned abruptly away to follow the wagons but Billy's voice stopped him.

"Mr. Hinter, where did that stuff on them wagons come from?"

"Why, it belongs to Mr. Scroggie," Hinter answered. "It was brought across from Ohio by schooner. You know what it is, I suppose?"

"I take it it's machinery an' stuff for a saw-mill," answered Billy moodily. "Is it?"

"No. It's a couple of boring rigs, Billy. Mr. Scroggie

is going to earn the good will of all of us here by boring for water and giving us fine wells on our farms. Don't you think that is mighty good of him? "

" Yes, sir. If we had a good well I wouldn't have to drive the cows down to the lake every night, like this."

" That's so, Billy." Hinter laughed and slapped the lad's shoulder. " Well I'll see that he bores on your daddy's farm just as soon as he strikes water on his own. I intend to help him get started, because I think it's going to be a good thing for everybody. Besides, I know boring-rigs from bit to derrick. It's my trade, you see."

Billy nodded. " An' is the schooner still anchored off here? " he asked. " I might take a fish-boat an' row out to her, if she is."

" No," Hinter answered. " She didn't anchor off here; water's too shallow. She anchored off Gibson's Grove, five miles up the point. She's on her way back to Cleveland by now."

He was already several paces away, anxious to overtake the wagon. Billy stood looking after him, a frown on his brow. " Gibson's Grove," he repeated. " So that's where Gibson's Grove is! " Then the message which the strangers had sent by old Harry might have had some significance, after all.

Billy passed on slowly after his cows, up through the spicy pines to the pebbled beach of the lake, pondering for a solution to the biggest problem his young mind had ever had to wrestle with. He seated himself on the prow of the big fish-boat, his eyes on the thirsty cattle now belly-deep in the blue water, drinking their fill. Along the shore stood the big reels used for holding the seines and nets when not in use. The twine had been newly coal-tarred and the pungent odor of the tar mingled pleasingly with the breath

of pine and the sweet freshness of the sun-warmed water.

Billy's eyes strayed to those reels and he sighed to think that the washing and retarring of the nets was just another sign that the glad summer holidays would soon be over and the drab days of fall—and school—would soon be there. A low-flying flock of black ducks passed over his head in flight from the lake's bosom where they had rested through the day to the marsh feeding grounds across the point, and the shadow passed from the boy's face.

After all fall had its compensations. Glorious days beneath lowering skies in a wind-whipped blind were before him; stormy days when the ducks would sweep in to his decoys and his old "double-barrel" would take toll. If only Frank Stanhope was to be the teacher instead of that cold-eyed, mean looking Johnston. He knew he would not get along with Johnston. And school was to open on Monday. Great Scott! The very thought made him shiver.

The cows waded to shore slowly, pausing to brush the troublesome flies from bulging sides with moist noses, halting to drink again and again, loath to leave this great body of cool delicious water. Billy did not hurry them. He thought he understood their feelings in the matter. It would be a long while before they would have a chance to drink again. It must be awful, he reasoned, to have to do without a drink so long. The thought made him thirsty. With his hands he scooped a hole close to the edge of the lake, and slowly the miniature well filled with milky water, which immediately cleared, and lay before him limpid and sweet and fit for king or thirsty boy.

He stretched himself full length on the sand, and drank. When he arose, wiping his mouth, the cows had moved off lazily towards the Causeway. Billy did not follow at once. He did not want to miss the dance of the fire-flies above

the darkening marsh along the Causeway, the twilight blush on the pine tips of Point Aux forest, the light-house gleam, nor the prayer-time hush of the mystery-filled rush-land. So he tarried beside the lake until the pines and cedars had melted into indistinct masses and the call of the whip-poor-will sounded faintly from far away. Then he turned homeward.

As he left the pine grove for the main road he discerned a lone figure standing on the Causeway, with head lifted and turned towards the still faintly glowing west, and his footsteps quickened.

"Teacher," he cried in surprise, "you here?"

Frank Stanhope turned slowly and held out his hands.

"Billy Boy," he said, with a smile, "I had to come, at last. Every time you have offered to guide me to this old spot we knew and loved and enjoyed together I have refused because — because I thought I couldn't stand it; because I am unable to see what my heart and senses tell me is here. But tonight I groped my way down, knowing that you would find me and help me home.

He placed his hand on Billy's shoulder, and turned once again toward the bay. "I am blind," he said, softly, "but I can tell you how it looks across yonder. There's a white splash of water between deep shadows, and there's just a faint tinge of crimson above the tree-tops. The mist is rising off the marsh; the fire-flies are playing cross-tag above the cat-tails. The light-house —"

He paused abruptly, and the boy felt the hand on his shoulder tremble.

"You tell me, Billy," he said huskily — "tell me if the light shines as brightly as when we watched it together."

"Why, teacher, it's jest as bright as ever," cried the boy. "It fair seems to laugh as it swings 'round an'

jumps down the bay like a long, white arm."

"Does it, Billy, does it?" cried the man, eagerly.

"Yep, an' everythin' else is jest like you said, too, only the red streaks have gone from above the trees now."

"But the light is the same, isn't it, Billy?"

"Jest the same as ever. There, teacher, it fair laughed right out at us then."

"Did it, Billy, did it? And is my face turned towards it now, Billy?"

"Not quite. There, now you are facin' it."

"Thanks. Now you mustn't tell me when it comes again — the light — I want to see if I can feel it. I hope —"

He caught his breath and stood with lifted face, as the white light swept it, lingered on it, drew from it reluctantly.

"Thank God," he whispered, and stood trembling. Then, as though to himself, he said softly: "It is as though her soft hand touched these eyes that will never see again."

Then, as the first note of a night-bird came soft and fluted from a distant willow copse, Billy took his hand and drew him up along the corduroy road stretching through the shadows.

CHAPTER XVI

BILLY MEETS A DIVINITY

Billy spent the days preceding the reopening of the Valley School much as a criminal awaiting execution might spend his last hours of life. The fact that Trigger Finger Tim had always accepted the inevitable sentence of fate with calm and undaunted spirit was the one buoy to which he might cling in a turbulent sea of uncertainty. There had been so much to do; so little had been done. The hiding place of old Scroggie's will was still a secret; no check had been put upon the preparations of the interloper who claimed to be the heir of the Scroggie estate; the mystery surrounding the store robbery remained a mystery; his friend Frank Stanhope was growing thin and pale from secret suffering. And on Monday morning the Valley School would open!

It was tough! Billy felt sure that had he been allowed a little more time he might have solved one or more of the problems which weighed him down. He felt like a man who was being cut suddenly off from his usefulness. Saturday he spent roaming the big woods alone. On Saturday evening Maurice came over and the two went down to Levee Creek, set sail in the old punt and steered up-bay towards the light-house.

Arriving they found Hinter there, so did not remain long. It was while Erie Landon was preparing a lunch for them that Billy got an opportunity to whisper something in her ear. The girl's cheeks flushed and her blue eyes grew deep with feeling.

"You tell him, Billy Boy, that the light he feels is my promise of fidelity," she said softly, "my love, my prayers, my hope. And tell him that I know all will be well."

That night, after separating from Maurice, Billy went over to the Stanhope cottage. It was late but Frank Stanhope was standing beside the white gate, his arms folded on its top, his chin upon them.

He raised his face at sound of the boy's step. "Ho, Billy!" he called cheerfully. "Is it you?"

"Yes, teacher," Billy came close to him and the two stood for a long time in the silence of mute understanding. Then the boy delivered the message just as Erie had whispered it. Stanhope did not speak. He simply lifted his face to the stars, eyes streaming, lips moving dumbly. Billy moved softly away through the shadows.

Next day was Sunday and Billy did not like Sundays. They meant the scrubbing of his face, ears and neck with "Old Brown Windsor" soap until it fairly cracked if he so much as smiled, and being lugged off with his parents and Anse to early forenoon Sunday School in the little frame church in the Valley. There was nothing interesting about Sunday School; it was the same old hum-drum over and over again — same lessons, same teachers, same hymns, same tunes; with Deacon Ringold's assertive voice cutting in above all the other voices both in lessons and singing and with Mrs. Scraff's shrill treble reciting, for her class's edification, her pet verse: "Am I nothing to thee, all ye who pass by?" — only Mrs. Scraff always improvised more or less on the scriptures, and usually threw the verse defiantly from her in this form: "You ain't nuthin to me, all you who pass me by."

Billy knew exactly what he was going to hear at Sunday School, and what he was going to see, and there wasn't

much of interest in that for a live boy. Consequently he was quite unprepared for the unexpected shock he received on this particular morning, when he trailed dejectedly into the Sunday School room behind his mother and Anson.

As he passed up the aisle something strange and mysterious seemed to draw his eyes toward a certain spot. He looked and there, gazing at him from eyes of blue, rose-bud lips half parted in a smile, was a girl—and such a girl!

Billy stood stock still in the aisle and stared at the vision of loveliness. She was dressed in white and her hair was curly and as golden as that of the pictured angel in his mother's Bible. Never before had he seen such a gloriously beautiful creature.

He became conscious that the droning hum of teachers and classes had given place to hushed calm; that all eyes were turned upon him, standing there in the aisle and staring at this picture of absolute perfection. With an effort he drew his eyes away and stumbled forward to his place in class.

Several times during the next half hour Billy, allowing his gaze to wander across the church, caught those blue eyes fastened upon him and his heart began to flutter strangely. An ungovernable desire to misbehave himself took possession of him. Never in his life had his head felt so light—unless it was the night when he and Maurice had inadvertently mistaken hard cider for sweet and had nearly disgraced themselves. He was not even aware of who was beside him on his seat, until a pair of stubby fingers pinched his leg and he came down to earth to look into Jim Scroggie's grinning face.

"Oh, hello," he whispered, coldly. He was irritated at such unwarranted interruption of his soul-feast. He settled

low in his seat and pretended to give his attention to the teacher, Cobin Keeler.

Jim nudged him. "What you think of her?" he asked proudly.

Billy frowned. "Who?"

Jim nodded across to the girl in white. "That's Lou," he informed Billy, "my sister."

Billy gave such a perceptible start that he knocked the "Sunday Lesson Helps" sheet out of the hands of Elgin Scraff, on his left. That this snub-nosed, flat-faced, beefy boy beside him could possibly be a brother to the dainty, angelic creature who had caused his heart to turn such violent flip-flops and disorganize his whole mental poise was inconceivable.

And still, it must be true. Immediately his manner towards Scroggie underwent a change. All the antipathy that a woods-born boy can feel toward a city-bred one vanished suddenly at the intelligence imparted to him. It was the look of true comradeship, the smile that always won him confidence and fidelity, that he gave Jim now, as he whispered: "Any time you want'a borrie my shot-gun, Jim, jest let me know."

Scroggie beamed. Being the son of his father he lacked nothing in astuteness. He realized, as all brothers realize sooner or later, that a pretty sister is an asset.

"An' the punt too?" he asked.

Billy nodded. Jim, had he but known it, might have had everything Billy owned, including Croaker, Ringdo, Moll and the pups.

Mr. Keeler had finished the reading of the lesson, skipping most of the big words and laying particular stress on those he was sure of, and had stood up facing his class of boys, to ask them certain questions pertaining to the lesson,

thereby bringing all whispered conversation to a halt. He cleared his throat and ran a critical eye down the line of upturned faces. When Mr. Keeler asked a question it was in a booming voice that carried from pulpit to ante-room of the building.

"Kin any boy in this here class tell me why Christ walked on the sea of Galilee?" he now asked.

Nobody answered. Billy, casting a quick glance across the aisle, found Lou Scroggie's blue eyes watching him intently. They seemed to say "Surely, you can answer that."

Billy shifted uneasily in his seat. He was sorry now that he had not paid closer attention to the reading of the lesson.

"Why did Christ walk on the sea of Galilee?" repeated Mr. Keeler, folding his arms impressively and looking hard at Billy, who once more shot a side-long glance across the room. The blue eyes were wide open with wonder and astonishment now, that he could not answer so simple a question as that. Billy's mind worked with lightning speed. He would answer that question if it cost him his life. Promptly he stood up.

Mr. Keeler looked surprised; so did Billy's class-mates; so did all members of all the classes and the teachers. So did Billy himself. The drowsy hum of reciting voices died suddenly and a great stillness succeeded it. It seemed to Billy that he was standing alone on top of a flimsy scaffold, hundreds of feet in the air, waiting for Mr. Keeler, high executioner, to spring the trap-door that would launch him into oblivion.

He glanced at the window. It was raised but a few inches; exit was effectively closed in that direction. He made up his mind to reach for his hat and walk with dig-

nity from the class, the church and those soulless, sinister-faced people who watched and waited gloatingly for his downfall. No, there was still a better plan. He would stagger and grope his way out like one who had been suddenly stricken with sickness. Yes, that was what he would do.

Then through the haze of uncertainty two wide blue eyes seemed to meet his own; eyes that smiled to him confidence in his ability to make good; eyes that said as plainly as words: "I knew you could do it."

Billy braced himself. At the same time he caught a glimpse of Anson's leering face and inwardly vowed that that young man should have plenty of reason to regret that leer.

Mr. Keeler was leaning across the back of the long seat, smiling commendingly upon him.

"William Wilson will tell us why Christ walked on the sea of Galilee," he boomed. "Come William, answer up, my boy."

Billy drew in his breath hard. He fully intended that none of those straining ears should miss his answer. Suddenly it had come to him that it was an easy question to answer; there could in fact be but one answer to it.

"Because He didn't have no boat!"

In the deep silence following his answer Billy sat down. Then a murmur of gasps, whispers and giggles grew up, which died suddenly to silence again, as Mr. Keeler's voice rang out.

"Correct! Now, boys, we will get on with our lesson."

During the closing hymn Billy managed to evade the eyes of his elders long enough to slip outside. He wanted to be alone — alone to ponder over this great and wonderful thing that had come into his life. It was love — yes it

certainly was love, strong worshipful love such as comes to but few, and to those few only once. Such love had made Trigger Finger Tim leap a fifty-foot chasm, swim a swift, ice-encumbered river and fight single-handed a band of painted savages to free his sweetheart from their murderous clutches. Billy knew that he would do as much for *her*!

He strayed into the beech grove sighing, striving to realize all that had suddenly happened to him. Never in all his dreams had he imagined such a face could belong to mortal girl. He must see her again—yes, he must see her soon again—perhaps speak with her. The very thought of it made him dizzy.

He wanted to tear up a sapling by the roots and bust something with it, wanted to shout, wanted to let all the world know his joy. But he didn't. He compromised by standing on his head and walking the full length of the mossy grove on his hands.

That day at dinner for the first time in his life he found it impossible to eat. Food choked him. He left the others eating, with a word or two about having eaten heartily of thimble-berries and not caring for anything more.

Out in the shed he found Moll, anxious over one of her pups which seemed stupid and sick. Billy picked up the pup and cuddled it. He found himself crying over its sniffing whimpers of pain. Love is a grand thing if only because of the softening influence it exerts in the savage breast of man. Billy could not remember ever having actually cried over a sick puppy before. It was as though *she* stood there, white hands clasped, blue eyes filled with commiseration, the gold of her hair forming a halo above her bent head. He could almost hear her voice saying: "Great, tender heart, cease thy tears. Am I not close

beside thee to help thee bear thy sorrow?" That's what Avilee Rochaw had said to Trigger Finger, in the book.

He put the pup tenderly down beside its mother and went out behind the wood-pile to wait for Anse. He wanted to tell him that he forgave him for being such a low-down tattle-tale and the meanest brother that ever lived. That's what *she* would have him do, he knew. He was a changed being. If he was to win her love, he was going to be worthy.

He waited for an hour but Anson did not come. How was he to know that Billy had undergone a change of heart? Had he not caught the cold glint in Billy's eyes, when he had sneered at him in the class? Previous experiences had taught him caution. He had watched his brother go out behind the wood-pile and had promptly made tracks in the opposite direction.

At supper time Billy's appetite had not returned. He did make something of a pretense at eating but it did not deceive the eyes of his watchful mother, who for reasons of her own restrained herself from making any reference to his mopishness.

That night as he was undressing for bed Mrs. Wilson came softly up the stairs, a tumbler half filled with a smoky liquid in one hand, a black strap in the other.

"Here, you Willium," she commanded, "you drink these here salts and not a word out o' you, or I'll tan you good and plenty."

Billy turned slowly, his fingers fumbling with his cotton braces. He looked at the noxious dose in the tumbler, then at his mother's face. "All right," he said gently, "I'll take 'em, Ma; give 'em here."

His mother gasped. Whatever was coming over the boy, she wondered. Never before had she been able to get a

dose of medicine down him without a struggle. There could be only one answer. He was sick — sicker than he let on.

She set the glass on the little table and let the strap slip to the floor. She put her hands on his shoulders and turned him about so that the light fell full on his face. She saw that it was really pale — yes, and wistful. Anse had told her about having seen Billy kiss the pup and cry over it. Now a lump came into her throat as she looked into the grey, unwavering eyes. With a sob, she threw her arms about his neck and drew him close to her. Billy patted her shoulder and let her cry. He could not guess her reason for it, but for that matter he could not understand why he was crying too, unless indeed it was his great and worshipful love still working overtime.

Mrs. Wilson subsided at last and wiped her eyes on her apron. Then she took Billy's face between her hands and kissed him on the freckled nose. "I know how much you miss your own Ma, William," she said, "and I know I kin never take her place, but I love you, an' it worries me awful to think anythin' might happen to you."

"Nuthin's goin' to happen to me, Ma," Billy assured her. "I'm feelin' bully. Don't you worry none."

Mrs. Wilson sighed. "Well, if you're sure you don't need these here salts —" she lifted the glass and stood hesitating, "why, I don't s'pose there's re'lly any call fer you to take 'em. It seems too bad to waste 'em, though."

Billy turned toward Anson's bed, from which, for the second time, he was sure had come a faint titter. "I was thinkin'," he said in answer to his mother's quick look, "that it wouldn't hurt Anse none to have a dose. He does grit his teeth somethin' awful when he's asleep."

“ You don’t tell me, Willium! Why then, salts is jest what he needs. I’ll wake him up an’ give ’em to him.”

* * * * *

It was long after his mother had left the loft and Anse’s wails of protest and wild promises of vengeance had given place to the regular breathing of peaceful sleep that Billy lay awake, gazing wide-eyed through the dark.

Above him bent a face with tender blue eyes and red, half-smiling lips beneath a crowning glory as golden as frost-pinched maple leaf. And she would be at school in the morning! It was while pondering on how he might contrive to wear his Sunday clothes on the morrow that Billy fell asleep to dream that he was old man Scroggie’s ghost and that he was sitting in the centre of Lake Erie with the big hardwoods bush on his knees, waiting for *her* to come that he might present it all to her.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DREAD DAY DAWNS

It was broad daylight when Anson, in response to an angry call from the bottom of the stairway, sat up in bed. Vaguely he realized that in some dire way this glad morning proclaimed a day of doom, but his drowsy senses were still leaping vast chasms of dreamland — striving to slip from the control of saner reasoning and drift away with a happy abandon of dire results to follow. What boy has not had the same experience, even although he knew that a razor-strop, wielded by a vigorous hand, would in all probability accomplish quickly what his drowsy will had failed to accomplish? Anson was just dropping off into the lulling arms of Morpheus when that extra sense, possessed by all boys in a measure and by certain boys in particular, warned him back to wakefulness and a realization of his danger.

He was out of bed and pulling his braces over his shoulders by the time the heavy footsteps of his mother sounded at the top of the stairs.

“You, Anse!” came Mrs. Wilson’s voice. “Have I gotta limber you up with the strap, after all?”

“Comin’, Ma,” responded Anse, sleepily.

“Well, you’d best come quick, then. You’ll be gettin’ enough hidin’s today — if that new teacher’s any good — without me havin’ to wear my arm out on you ’fore breakfast.”

Anson stood still, fumbling the buttons. So that was it! School! He knew it was some awful catastrophe.

Where was Billy? He glanced across at the other bed. Billy was not in it. He went slowly downstairs, washed himself, and went in to breakfast. Billy was not there. His father was just getting up from the table.

"Where's Bill?" Anson asked him.

"Down feedin' his pets, most likely," answered his father as he went out. A moment or two later Billy came in. The boys seated themselves in their places and ate their breakfast in silence.

"Is our dinner up, Ma?" Billy asked, as he pushed back his chair.

Mrs. Wilson nodded. "It is. Two pieces of bread an' butter an' a doughnut an' a tart fer each of you. Is it enough?"

"I guess so," Billy replied indifferently.

Anson eyed him suspiciously, then turned to his mother. "I wish't you'd do our dinners up separate, Ma," he whiped.

"Why?" asked Mrs. Wilson, in surprise.

"Well, 'cause Bill hogs it, that's why," complained Anson. "Last time we had tarts I didn't get none. An' it's the same with pie an' cake."

Mrs. Wilson gazed sternly at Billy. "Willium, do you take Anson's tarts and pie?" she asked ominously.

"Yes, ma'am," answered Billy, promptly.

"There now!" exulted Anson, glancing triumphantly at his mother, who sat staring and incredulous at the unabashed offender.

Billy looked gravely down at his accuser, then apprehensively at his judge. As no immediate sentence seemed forthcoming he turned toward the door.

"Stop!" Mrs. Wilson had risen suddenly from her chair and stood pointing an accusing finger at Billy.

"You'll ketch it fer this, an' don't you ferget it," she stormed, "an' if I ever hear of you gobblin' up Anson's share o' the lunch ag'in, you young glutton, you'll go to school fer a month without any lunch a'tall."

Billy turned. "I didn't say I *ate* Anson's pie an' cake, Ma," he said gently. "I didn't take it 'cause I wanted it."

"Then why did you take it a'tall, I want'a know?"

"I took it 'cause I thought it was bad fer him. You see, Ma, Anse suffers turrible from indigestion," Billy explained. "'Course maybe you don't notice it same as I do, 'cause you don't sleep in the same room with him. But Ma, he groans an' gasps all night— an' he has the most awful dreams—now don't you Anse?" he asked, turning to his brother.

Anson started to whimper. "I do have bad dreams," he confessed miserably, "but pie an' tarts ain't to blame fer it."

"Silence, you!" Mrs. Wilson reached for the dinner-pail and proceeded to extract from it one tart, one doughnut. "I guess maybe your brother's right," she said grimly. "If that's the way you carry on nights we'll hold you off pastry fer a while. Now then, grab that pail and off to school with both o' you!"

Billy was outside first and waiting for Anson at the road gate when he came down the path, dejectedly wiping his eyes and vowing inaudible threats at the agent of his new woe.

"Now, then," said Billy as he came up, "maybe you'll begin to see that it don't pay to blab so danged much."

"It was dirty mean of you," sniffled Anson. "You know how much I like pie an' tarts; an' here I am havin' to lug youarn an' gettin' none fer myself. Fer two cents I'd chuck this dinner-pail in the crick."

"An' fer two cents I'd punch that crooked eye of yourn straight," cried Billy, his temper rising. "You'd best close your mouth while the closin's good, an' if anythin' happens to that pail you're goin' to hear from me."

They passed on in silence until the hardwood grove came in sight. Here Billy paused. "You go on, Anse," he said. "I'm goin' over to the menagerie fer a look over things. An' see here." He grabbed his brother's shoulder and swung him about. "I'm goin' to tell you somethin', an' if you so much as peep it to Ma I'm goin' to pass the word to Ringdo an Croaker that they're free to do what they like to you; see?"

Anson shuddered. "Aw, who's goin' to peep?" he returned.

"All right then. Now listen. This mornin' I tied my Sunday clothes up an' throwed 'em out our winder. Then I got up an' sneaked 'em over to the menagerie. I'm goin' to wear 'em to school. Never you mind why, it's none of your business. When I blow into school this mornin' dressed to kill I don't want you to look too darned surprised, that's all. Now if you'll keep your mouth shut tight about that I promise not to let my witch-coon an' witch-crow eat you while you sleep; an' I'll tell you what else I'll do, I'll give you my tart an' my doughnut. Is it a bargain?"

Anson nodded eagerly.

"All hunky. Now you move along, an' if you happen to meet Fatty Watland, er Maurice, er any other boys, don't you let on a word about this."

"I won't," promised Anson. "Cross my heart, Bill."

Billy ducked into the path through the grove and Anson resumed his reluctant pace toward the Valley School. On the bridge across Levee creek he came up with Elgin

Seraff. Elgin was standing with his arms on the bridge rail, looking dejectedly down into the water.

"Hello," Anson accosted. "Goin' to school?"

Elgin lifted his head slowly. "Yep, you?"

Anson nodded and set the dinner-pail down on the bridge.

"Where's Bill?"

"He'll be along soon. Here he comes now; no 'taint neither, it's Fatty Watland. Wonder where he's been up that way?"

Watland came puffing up, his round face red and perspiring. "Gee!" he panted, "I've been all the way to the store. Had to get some sulphur fer Ma. She found a wood-tick that old Sport scratched off him on the floor, an' she swears it's a bed-bug; an' now she's goin' to burn this sulphur in all the rooms."

A grin rippled across his face and grew into a chuckle. "I bet I sleep in the barn fer a week. I sure hate the smell of sulphur."

"Come on," said Elgin, "let's move on down to the schoolhouse." Side by side the three passed on up the hill and down into the valley.

The schoolhouse stood with a wide sloping green before it and a tangle of second growth forest behind it. It was not an old building, but had the appearance of senile old age. Its coat of cheap terra-cotta paint had cracked into many wrinkles; its windows looked dully out like the lustreless eyes of an old, old man. The ante-room roof had been blown off by a winter's gale and replaced inaccurately, so that it set awry, jaunty and defiant, challenging the world. Its door hung on one hinge, leaning sleepily against a knife-scarred wall. A rail fence ran about the yard which was filled to choking with a rank growth of

smart-weed. In one corner of the yard was a well with a faded blue pump holding the faded red arm of a handle toward the skies, as though evoking high heaven to bear witness that it was never intended to lead such a lonely and useless existence.

The boys approached the building slowly and as they neared its sombre portals silence fell upon them. They opened the creaking gate and entered the building much after the manner of heroes who must stand blindfolded against a wall and wait the word "Fire!" They had to go through with it, that was all.

The building held all the unmistakable odors of a school room. The smell of chalk dust, mouldy bread crusts, mice, dirty slates and musty books rose up to smite the arrivals. Four rows of pine seats, blackened with ink-daubs and deeply scarred by pocket-knives, ran the entire length of the building. A big box stove stood in the centre of the room, its wavering pipe supported by wires from the ceiling.

Walter Watland looked about for a good place in which to conceal his package of sulphur and decided that in the empty stove he had discovered the place of all places. So, while Anson and Elgin were investigating the teacher's desk and picking out their seats, he proceeded to hide his sulphur in the stove's black depths. Then he went outside with his companions to await the coming of the new teacher.

Scarcely had the three seated themselves on the top rail of the yard fence than from all directions other pupils of the Settlement began to arrive. Sand Sharkers, sullen and defiant, holding themselves apart, came in one big group.

Jim Scroggie entered the school yard with his sister by his side. He paused a moment to let his eyes stray to the

faces of the three hopefuls on the fence, conjecturing with a boy's intuition that in this trio he saw some of the ring-leaders of the school. Jim wore a smart tweed coat and knickerbockers, and a shirt of grey flannel with a soft silk tie. His sister, Lou, was dressed daintily in white, with soft blue collar that matched the glorious depths of her eyes. She smiled now, and the three on the fence immediately underwent a change of heart. Elgin Scraff was the first to slide down and approach the new boy in a spirit of fellowship.

"Hello," he said genially. "I've got a crackin' good seat. You kin set with me if you like."

Jim shook his head. "Promised Billy Wilson I'd sit with him," he said. "Kin you tell me where he's goin' to sit?"

Elgin was about to answer when he caught a gasp from the watchers on the road. "Teacher's comin'!" went forth the cry.

Down the hill came a thin, rangy bay horse, astride which, an open book in his hand, sat Mr. G. G. Johnston. As he drew up in front of the gate he closed the book and turned his frowning eyes on the building. Utterly ignoring the awed, watching faces he shook his head grimly and, looking to neither right nor left, rode in through the open gate. Not until he had unbridled his horse and turned him loose to seek a breakfast as best he knew how, while he investigated the school's interior, did the boys and girls outside give way to their feelings.

Then Maurice Keeler whistled. "Whew! Ain't he the old human icicle?" he asked.

"You bet!" came the spontaneous answer.

"Gosh," cried Elgin Scraff, "there goes the bell! Come on everybody; let's get our medicine."

Just as the boys and girls were settling down in their seats and Jim Scroggie was glancing anxiously doorward Billy strode in. He was resplendent in his Sunday best and wore a wild thorn blossom in his button hole. He glanced quickly about the room and caught the glint and sunlight for which he hungered—a smile from the lips of Lou Scroggie. Then he seized Jack LaRose by the scruff of the neck, jerked him from the seat near the door and motioned Jim Scroggie over. “We’ll set here,” he whispered. “It’s close to the outside in case we have to make a quick get-away.”

The new teacher paid no attention to the little scrimmage between LaRose and Billy. He stood on the platform, tall, spare, hard-featured and stern, and let his black eyes bore into the souls of the pupils, one after the other. Not until the silence of suspense was almost unbearable did he speak; then clearing his throat he gave forth in stern tones the following edict:

“Boys and girls, I am your teacher. I shall expect you to obey me implicitly. If you do not, I shall punish you. I am here to teach you; you are here to learn and profit from my teaching. I have heard bad reports of most of you, but for the present I shall refrain from mentioning any names. When in the school-room you will be allowed to address me as ‘Sir.’ Outside the school-room you will not address me in any manner whatsoever.”

He paused to survey the rows of uplifted faces and let his words sink home. Then lifting a long hickory pointer from his desk, and holding it much as a conjuror might hold his wand, he gripped the edge of the desk with one bony hand and leaning forward, said:

“Boys and girls, from what has been told me I surmise that my predecessor has spoiled you. I do not censure him;

undoubtedly he worked according to his lights. I have been twenty years a teacher. I am your superior in strength, wisdom and intellect; and this I want you always to keep in mind. I shall tolerate neither familiarity nor disobedience. You will do well to obey me without question and do, worthily, the tasks I set for you. I believe in administering punishment to wrong-doers, severe punishment. It is not my purpose to deceive either you or the ratepayers of this school; therefore, I will admit that I like neither this district nor its people. That, however, will not prevent me from fulfilling my duty to the best of my ability."

He ceased speaking and drew himself up slowly, pursing his stern lips. "That is all I have to say for the time being," he said. "We shall endeavor to air this building, after which we will form classes. Will the fat boy with the rumpled hair and dirty neck, the one who is whispering to the boy behind him, be good enough to step forward?"

All eyes switched from the teacher to Fatty Watland. Fatty, his face very red, rose slowly and stood before the frowning Mr. Johnston.

"What is your name, boy?" asked the teacher.

"Walter Watland."

"Walter Watland — what?"

"That's all. Jest Walter Watland."

Mr. Johnston frowned darkly. "Walter Watland—*what?*" he repeated.

"*Sir,*" prompted a voice from the back seat.

"Walter Watland, *sir,*" panted Fatty, glimpsing the light in the nick of time.

"Very well, Walter, you may go home and get a pail of water. My experience with school wells," glancing out of the window to the blue pump, "has been that during

the holidays they become a veritable death trap for frogs, mice and other vermin."

Walter moved quickly to execute the order. Mr. Johnston addressed the rest of the pupils. "School is now dismissed until we raise the windows and air the room."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE METTLE OF THE BREED

Immediately thirty boys and girls leaped to their feet and windows went up with a bang.

"I think," Mr. Johnson's voice was heard above the din, "it would be a good plan to start a fire in that big stove. This place is positively vault like with dampness."

A number of the boys ran out to gather kindling and wood and soon a fire was crackling in the stove.

"Pupils will now take their seats," commanded the teacher, tinkling the bell on his desk. There was a hurried scramble as each boy and girl found his and her place.

"We will now have—" resumed the teacher, then paused to glare angrily at the stove. From every crack in its rusty sides was pouring forth a whitish-yellow smoke that gripped the throat and smelled like a breath from the very pit of darkness. Mr. Johnston attempted to proceed and failed dismally. He was choking, as was every boy and girl in the room.

It was Billy Wilson who acted promptly. Running to the stove he opened the door and lifted out the blazing wood and, at the risk of scorching himself badly, ran with it from the room.

It was nearly half an hour before Mr. Johnston summoned the boys and girls from the open windows to their seats. The room still smelled strongly of sulphur, but one might still breathe and live.

In the interval of waiting for the air to clear the new teacher's face had turned a ghastly white. His black eyes

blazed; his thin lips were drawn back from his strong, irregular teeth. Gazing upon him, the boys and girls quaked in apprehension. Their fears were well founded. Never before in all his long career in administering knowledge to grubby and inferior minds had Mr. G. G. Johnston been subject to such deadly insult as had been offered him here. It was fully a minute before he could command his voice sufficiently to speak and when he did the words trickled through his stiff lips thinly.

“Boys and girls,” he said at length, “one or more of you have been guilty of the most unpardonable misdemeanor that has ever come under my observation as a teacher. I realize that the dirty trick has been deliberately planned, the motive being perhaps to test me. You may believe me when I inform you that the one who placed that sulphur in the stove will have plenty of reason to regret having done it. I intend to flog him — or her — until he — or she — cannot stand. I shall now ask the one who is guilty of the offense to stand up.”

Nobody stood. Anson was on the point of jumping to his feet and telling who had brought the sulphur into the room but, on second thought, sat still. The teacher had asked who had put it in the stove. Certainly it had not been Fatty Watland, because he had gone on an errand for the teacher long before the fire was started.

Mr. Johnston smiled darkly and nodded. “As I thought. The one who did it is too much of a coward to confess it,” he grated, his voice shaking. “Well, there remains but one thing to do. If the guilty party is to be punished, I must punish you *one and all*.”

There was the sound of the quick intaking of breath, and an audible long-drawn “Oh!” from the girls.

“I must punish each and every one of you,” Mr. John-

ston reiterated, picking up the pointer. "I shall begin on the boy who is smiling so defiantly in the back seat, if he will be good enough to step up here."

"I guess that's me," said Billy, jumping to his feet and starting for the platform.

"That's a nice smile you wear," said Mr. Johnston scathingly as he gazed down at Billy, his bony fingers caressing the long, supple pointer.

"Glad you like it," said Billy.

"Eh? What's that?" Mr. Johnston fairly recoiled in surprise and indignation at the affront to his dignity. "Silence! boys and girls," he shouted, as a titter ran through the schoolroom.

"Now young man," he said grimly, grasping one of Billy's hands and pulling it forward and out, "I'm going to drive that happy smile from your face."

"You're a'goin' to find that some job," said Billy quietly.

"Well, we'll see, young Mr. Impudence." The long pointer rose and fell. Billy caught the stroke full on his palm. His face whitened with pain, but the smile did not leave his lips.

"Your other hand," commanded Mr. Johnston.

He bent forward to grasp the hand which Billy raised slowly, thereby dodging a stone ink-bottle hurled by Maurice Keeler. At it was the bottle struck the blackboard and broke, deluging the teacher's face with a sable spray.

Billy turned quickly. "No more of that," he said. "This is my funeral — and the teacher's. Everybody else keep out of it."

He squared his shoulders and held out his hand. The pointer came down with all the strength that the man dared put behind it. Johnston peered closely into the boy's face.

It was white and quivering but it still wore a smile.

"Take your seat," commanded the teacher. "Next boy forward!" One by one the boys walked up to receive their punishment. All took it bravely.

When, at last, the boys had all been attended to, Mr. Johnston paused for rest. "I shall now begin on the girls," he said, "but before administering punishment I am going to give the guilty boy, or girl, one more chance to confess. Will the one who put the sulphur in the stove stand up?"

As before, nobody moved.

Mr. Johnston smiled. "Very well. The girl with the handkerchief to her eyes, the one dressed in white and blue, five seats down, will come forward for punishment."

Billy felt his blood run cold. He could not believe his ears. The girl dressed in white and blue! Why, that was she — his angel — his light — his everything. And she was crying now. She was standing up, moving forward.

Like a flash Billy was on his feet. "Stop!" he cried, his voice ringing out like a challenge. "You don't whip her if I know it."

For the second time that morning Mr. Johnston received a violent shock to his dignity. Such rank insubordination he had never experienced before. The black eyes turned on Billy fairly darting sparks. "Take your seat, you impudent boy!" he thundered, "I see I have been too lenient with you. When I am through with the girls I shall flog you until you cry for mercy, and with you the boy who threw that bottle."

Billy was running up the aisle.

"Please sir, don't whip her," he said, pleadingly. "I'll own up. It was me that put the sulphur in the stove."

"You?" gasped Mr. Johnston. "You coward! to let

your companions be punished for your despicable act. Oh," he exulted, removing his coat and rolling up his sleeves, "won't I make you pay for playing the sneak?"

Billy was giving no attention to the teacher. He was edging towards Lou Scroggie, who stood looking at him from dumb, pleading eyes.

"Go outside," he whispered. "Please do; I kin stand anythin', but I don't want you to see it."

She turned slowly away, then came back and put her hands on his shoulders. She did not speak but the look she gave him was enough. His heart laughed. He turned toward the teacher with so glad a light in his grey eyes that the schooled moulder of young souls gazed back at him in bewilderment.

Was this the brand of boy this Shagland Settlement bred, he wondered. If so, God help him and his precepts.

From the bottom of his heart he wished that he had never seen the place, never encountered the spirit of its woods-born. He knew his capabilities and for once in his life, he confessed to himself, he had over-estimated them. He wanted to give this boy now standing so fearlessly before him a whipping such as he would remember to his dying day, but to save his life he couldn't enter into the task with his old-time zest—not with those clear eyes looking so contemptuously into his very soul.

The room had grown still—a graveyard hush, broken only by a sob from the tenderest-hearted of the girls, who knew that Billy had lied to save one of their sex.

Johnston had turned to his desk and secured a shorter, stronger pointer. The veins between his shaggy eyebrows stood out clearly defined as he motioned Billy up on the platform.

It was just at this juncture that Fatty Watland arrived,¹

smiling and panting, with the pail, borrowed from his mother, full of drinking water. It took him but a moment to learn from one of the boys what had transpired. It took him still less time to reach the platform. There, with much humiliation of spirit and many "sirs," he explained to the greatly surprised, and it must be confessed, secretly relieved Mr. Johnston, the true state of affairs.

There was no doubt in the world that Fatty regretted the part he had so unwittingly played in the day's disaster. He was sufficiently apologetic and low spirited to satisfy even the new teacher, who was content to let him off with a lecture.

Mr. Johnston then briefly stated to his pupils that a mistake had been made. He did not say that he was sorry. That would have been an untruth. He did say that Billy deserved another whipping for lying, but under the circumstances he would excuse him, as he had already received unmerited punishment.

At the close of his first day in the Valley School Mr. Johnston was forced to confess that he had considerable work before him. Had he been able to read the future and learn just what he would be obliged to undergo as teacher of that school, without doubt he would have climbed on the back of his thin horse and ridden straight away from Scotia Settlement, never to return. But he could not read what the future held, consequently he rode slowly towards Fairfield that first evening with the righteous feeling of one who had performed a difficult task well and satisfactorily—at least to himself.

Back in the schoolyard a real old fashioned indignation meeting was being held by thirty lusty boys and girls. That any man, teacher or no teacher, should come into their beloved Settlement and announce that he had no use

for it or its people and go on his way unscathed was beyond all understanding. Something would have to be done about it; but what? It was Billy who climbed up on the school fence, called order and offered the one sure solution to the problem.

"I guess we don't want'a keep him, do we?" he asked of his companions.

"No. No!" came in chorus.

"All right; that's settled. But listen, now, every one of you. He's gotta go of his own accord. We're not goin' to be disobedient in any way. Fer a time we'll eat out'a his hand. Now wait—" as a groan of protest went up—"let me finish afore you get the high-jumps, you fellers. At the end of two er three weeks somethin' is goin' to happen to Mr. Johnston. I'm not goin' to say what that somethin' is right now, but you'll all know soon enough. And if after it happens he's got nerve enough to come back here I miss my guess, that's all."

"Hurrah!" shouted the delighted boys. "We knowed you'd find a way to fix him, Billy."

Billy climbed down from the fence and his supporters gathered about him, eager to secure the details of his plan but he shook his head. "You kin jest leave it all to me, an' one er two others I'm goin' to pick to help me," he said. "It's soon enough fer you to know how we do it when it's done. Now, everybody go home."

Apparently quite by accident he found himself standing beside Lou Scroggie and the two fell into step together. They were the last to take the winding path toward the main road. An embarrassed silence fell between them, a silence which remained unbroken until they reached the creek bridge. Then the girl said shyly: "Do you mind if I call you Billy?"

Billy had to stifle his emotion and swallow twice before he answered: "That's what I'd like you to call me. I'll bet you can't say it, though."

"Oh, I can so!"

"Well, let's hear you, then."

He bent his head and held his breath, oblivious to everything save the ecstasy of that moment.

"Billy," she half-whispered, then hiding her flushed face in her hands she turned and ran from him.

Billy did not follow. Something, perhaps the primitive man in him, cautioned the unwisdom of so doing. From the dim, far-back ages woman has run and man has pursued. But a few wise men have waited.

So Billy watched her passing like a ray of soft light across the valley and around the golden curve of the road. Then with his arms on the bridge-rail, his eyes gazing deep into the amber depths of the water, he lived anew every moment of her nearness, until the hoarse, joyful cry of a crow broke in on his reverie. Croaker, having grown lonely, had come down to meet him.

So with the bird perched on his shoulders, muttering a strange jargon of endearments and throaty chuckles in his ear, Billy turned up the path, thinking still of a pair of blue eyes and a voice that had called him "Billy."

CHAPTER XIX

CROAKER BRINGS A GIFT

It was Sunday. Anson, with eyes close-shut and suds dripping from his freckled nose, was having his weekly ear and neck cleansing, his mother's strong hands applying the coarse wash-cloth. Billy stood by, anticipating his turn, his eyes straying occasionally to the long "muzzle-loader" hanging on the deer-prong rack. Tomorrow the duck-season opened and he was wondering how he was going to contrive to sneak the old gun down and give it a thorough cleaning. Suddenly he became aware that operations in the vicinity of the wash-basin had become suspended. He glanced across to find his mother's gaze fixed sternly upon him. Anson was looking mightily pleased.

"I want'a know how you got them ink blots on your good clothes. Have you been a'wearin' 'em to school?" asked Mrs. Wilson.

So that was it? Anson had "peached"! Billy swallowed hard. His mind reviewed the days of the past two weeks. Again he saw a pair of blue eyes, misty with love and feeling; heard a voice whose cadence was sweeter than honey saying, "My! Billy, you are so different from any other boy I've ever met; and you always wear such nice clothes, too." Oh those wonderful, joy-filled days! What boy would not have risked far more than he had risked to win such commendation from the girl of all girls.

"Well?" His mother's voice dispelled the vision. "Are you goin' to answer me, Willium?"

Billy squared his shoulders. Yes, he would do as *she*

would wish. He would confess. But the best of intentions go oft awry and Billy's present ones were suddenly side-tracked by a giggle from Anson, a giggle freighted with malice, triumph and devilish joy at his predicament.

Now, a boy may make up his mind to die a hero, but no boy cares to be ushered out by gibes and "I-told-you-so's." Billy promptly adopted new tactics. "This ain't *my* suit, Ma," he said.

Mrs. Wilson started so at his words that she rammed the cake of soap into Anson's mouth.

"Not yours? Then whose is it?" she cried in amazement.

"It's Anse's. We must have got 'em mixed when we was dressin'."

"William, are you lyin' to me? If you are it's goin' to be the costliest lie you ever told."

Billy returned her angry gaze without a flicker of an eyelid. The reproach in his grey eyes was enough to make any mother ashamed of having doubted, and, as a matter of natural consequence, anger her the more. "How do you know that's Anson's suit?" she shot at Billy, between rubs. "How do you know it, you young imp, you?"

Billy moved forward, halting a safe distance from his mother. "You'll remember, Ma, that Anse's pants has two hip pockets, an mine only one."

"Yes, that's so."

"An' his coat has two inside pockets, an' mine only one."

"I remember that, too. Well?"

Billy removed the coat he was wearing and passed it over to his mother. She turned it inside out, and inspected it closely.

"That's Anson's coat all right," she affirmed. "Now

twist about so's I kin see them hip pockets in the pants."

Billy did so. Then, there being nothing more left to do, he stepped back to watch the fireworks.

Stunned into inaction by the ease and suddenness with which Billy had turned the tables against him Anson had only time to take one longing glance toward the door. His mother had lifted the razor-strop from its nail and as he made a frenzied leap toward safety her strong hand gripped him by the wet hair. "Swish" fell the strop and Anson's wail of woe rent the Sabbath air. In vain he squirmed, cried, protested his innocence.

Having gotten nicely warmed up to her work Mrs. Wilson turned a deaf ear to his wails. "You would try to put off your dirty tricks on your brother, would you?" Swish-swish. "I'll teach you to wear your good clothes to school. I'll teach you to lie to me, you bad, deceitful, ungrateful boy, you!

"Now," she panted, having reached the limit of her strength, "you go upstairs with Willium and change clothes. Not another word, er I'll start in on you all over ag'in. Off you go, both o' you. And Willium," she called after them, "when you get into your own suit, don't you ferget to come here fer your scrubbin'."

When Billy reached the loft, Anson was standing in the center of the room, smashing with clenched fists at the empty air. Billy sat down on his bed and grinned. "You will run straight into trouble, in spite of all I say, Anse," he said gently. "It's all your own fault; you will be a tattle-tale."

Anson turned on him. "You mean sneak!" he gasped, "you've been wearin' my Sunday clothes 'stead of your own, an' I didn't know it."

Billy nodded. "You see, Anse, I knowed that sooner

or later you was bound to tell Ma, so I played safe, that's all."

Anson, still sniffing, finished his undressing. Billy nursed his knee in his hands and watched him. "'Course," he remarked, at length, "you'll be for tellin' Ma soon's she calms down a bit an' is ready to listen, but Anse I wouldn't do it if I was you."

"Well, you kin bet I jest will do it," promised Anson.

Billy stood up. "I'll tell you what I'm willin' to do, Anse," he suggested. "If you'll keep mum about this thing, I'll let you come duck-shootin' with me an' Maurice tomorrow."

Anson shook his head. "I don't want'a go duck-shootin'," he said. "I know jest what you fellers 'ud do; you'd get me in all the bog-holes an' make me carry your ducks. No sir, I'm goin' to tell Ma."

Billy tried further inducements. "I'll give you my new red tie an' celluloid collar," he offered.

"No!"

"Then," said Billy sorrowfully, turning toward the door, "I guess there's only one thing fer me to do."

"An' what's that?" asked Anse, apprehensively.

"Go an' tell Croaker an' Ringdo the whole business, an' let that crow an' swamp-coon 'tend to you."

"Hold on, Bill, wait a minute," Anson quavered.

"I've changed my mind, I'll take the tie an' collar an' call it square."

Billy turned and came back slowly to where he sat. "Anse," he said. "I ain't wantin' to see you witch-chased, so I'll jest give you the tie an' collar an' say not a word to Croaker er Ringdo; an' if you'll tell me somethin' I want'a know I'll let you sleep with my rabbit-foot charm underneath your piller."

Anson almost sobbed his relief. "I'll do it," he agreed. "What is it you want'a know, Bill?"

"I want'a know all you know about them men that are workin' Hinter's borin' outfit. Why ain't they ever seen outside that tall fence Scroggie's built 'round the derrick, an' why did he build that fence, anyways?"

Anson looked troubled. "Supposin' I don't know —" he began, but Billy shook his head.

"I happen to know you *do* know. 'Course you needn't tell, if you don't want to," he said. "You kin keep what you know to yourself an' take your chances with witches. I was jest givin' you a last chance, that's all."

He turned once more to the door but Anson jumped up and caught him by the arm. "Bill," he gasped. "I don't know why Hinter built that fence, cross my heart, I don't. But I'll tell you all I know about the men who're runnin' the rig. I been workin' fer the tool-dresser after school, fer a quarter a night. I've heard quite a lot o' talk among them fellers. Blamed if I could make head er tail of most of it but they mentioned a feller by the name of Jacobs an' they seem plumb scared to death of him. Funny, too, 'cause he's never been 'round there a'tall. Nobody ever comes there but Hinter."

"How do you mean they seem scared of Jacobs?"

"I kin tell by what they say. One night I heard the big feller, named Tom, say to Jack, the other man: 'If we don't strike the stuff Jacobs is done fer, an' both of us'll go with him.' An' the one named Jack he swore at him an' says: 'Shut your trap, Tom. One of these days Jacobs is goin' to hear you blattin'; then you're goin' to take a trip sooner than you expected.'"

Billy stood frowning. "Say, maybe Jacobs is the feller that fires the boilers that runs the windlass," he hazarded.

"Nope, that man's name's Sanderson. He don't have anythin' to do with the drillers. Nope, Bill, Jacobs hain't never been seen, but I'm dead sure he's the boss of the outfit."

"All right, Anse. You kin learn a lot more by keepin' your ears an' eyes open. Whatever you see an' hear, you're to tell me, see?"

Anson nodded.

"All hunky. Now, I'll jest peel off these duds, an' get inter my own. Ma'll be gettin' uneasy."

But when Billy, dressed in his own suit, descended the stairs to peer cautiously out, it was to find the room deserted. Mrs. Wilson's voice, high-pitched and excited, came from the back yard.

"William! oh William!" she was calling.

With a bound he was outside and over beside her. She sat on the block beneath the hop-vine, her face in her apron. She was rocking to and fro and sobbing.

"Ma," cried Billy, "whatever is the matter?"

"Oh William," she cried, "my heart is breakin'. Oh to think how I misjedge him!"

Billy's eyes opened wide. "Misjedge him?" he repeated.

"Oh the poor little dear! the poor little dear!" she wailed. "Me hatin' him like I did, and him doin' all he has fer me. Oh, William, I do feel so 'shamed, an' mean; I do so!"

Billy stared at his mother in amazement. "Jest what has Anse ever did fer you, Ma?" he asked wonderingly.

"Anse!" she snorted. "Who's talkin' about Anse? It's Croaker I mean. Look here what that darlin' crow brought me jest a few minutes ago."

She opened her hand. In it lay a shining twenty-dollar

gold piece. Billy's mouth fell open in astonishment.

"Croaker brought you that?" he gasped. "Well, I'll be shot!" Billy stood up and gazed about him. "Where's Croaker now?" he asked.

"I dunno. He jest laughed an' sailed away ag'in. I don't know where he got it but I do know good gold when I see it, Willium. Twenty dollars! Ain't it splendid?"

"It sure is, but I can't help wonderin' where Croaker found it. Maybe you wouldn't mind lettin' me off Sunday School today, Ma," he suggested, "so's I kin trail off an' find that Croaker. Any crow that kin pick up gold pieces that way is worth watchin'. Kin I go look fer him, Ma?"

Mrs. Wilson, at this particular moment, was in the mood to grant almost any request. "Why Willium," she said eagerly, "go seek him and bring him back home. Never ag'in will I wish him dead, poor little feller. But," she added as though realizing that her softened mood had carried her a little too far, "you see you get back here in time fer supper er I'm liable to tan you good."

Billy waited for no more. He was up and away like a shot. Mrs. Wilson, clutching her gold piece in one hand and brushing back her deranged hair with the other, went back into the house.

Anson, striving to keep his head above a shiny collar, about which was twisted a flaming red tie, was just issuing from the stairs. His mother opened her hand to display her gold piece, then closed it again. "You go right back upstairs and take off Willium's collar and tie," she commanded.

"It's my own collar an' tie," Anson declared, "Bill give it to me."

"Humph! That's jest like him, but why he should give you his best tie and collar is beyond me. Do you think

you deserve any gifts from your brother after what you done to him? It jest goes to show you what a real good heart that boy has. I declare, Anson, I do wish you was more like him. Now you get your hair combed and your hat brushed and get away to Sunday School."

"Yes, Ma'am; ain't you agoin', Ma?"

"I'll be 'long shortly; don't you wait fer me."

"But where's Bill? Ain't he agoin'?"

"No, he ain't agoin'; and now, not another of your fool questions. Slick your hair down and go at once. Do you hear me?"

Anson proceeded to obey orders without another word. As he picked up his hat and turned to the door, Mrs. Wilson opened her hand and held out the gold piece.

"Croaker found that and brought it to me," she said, proudly.

Anson's jaw dropped and he backed fearfully away.

"Don't you have nuthin' to do with it, Ma!" he cried.

"That Croaker's a witch crow, that's what he is! He's tryin' to tempt you with gold!"

Mrs. Wilson stood, the picture of amazement. "Have you gone stark and ravin' crazy, Anson?" she asked sternly. Then, anger mastering her, she reached for the broom standing in the corner. Anson promptly made his escape, but as he passed the open window, he gazed wildly in at his mother and cried again: "Don't you have nuthin' to do with that gold, Ma. If you do we'll all get burnt up in our beds, er get clawed to tatters!"

Mrs. Wilson sank down on a chair. "William's right," she sighed. "Anson's mind is gettin' a little unbalanced. I'll have to put him on diet and feed him slippery-elm bark and alloways."

Sighing dolefully she arose, placed her treasured gold

piece in the clock for safe keeping, and tying on her bonnet, left the house. She walked hurriedly down the path, thinking that perhaps she might be late for the opening hymn. As she was about to open the gate, a slender, sprightly old gentleman, dressed in long frock coat, stepped out from the trees bordering the road, and gravely lifting his shiny hat, bowed low, and said: "Your pardon, ma'am, I'm axin; but if ye'll permit me."

"Harry O'Dule," she gasped, as he swung the gate wide, "is it re'lly you?"

"Faith and who else ma'am," replied Harry. "The ould burrud wid new feathers is ut. Faith ut's manny a year since I laid these duds carefully by, thinkin' I'd be wearin' 'em niver ag'in until a day whin I'd not be knowin' ut. But, Mistress Wilson, ma'am, ut's other thoughts have been mine since I quit the dhrink. Pl'ase God but duty is iver clearer wid clearer understandin' and so ut is. Some day afore I die I'll glimpse me own skies and smell the burnin' peat, and if that is to be mine thin must I live me life clane here and do me duty like an Irishman av birth. So, ma'am, it's off I am to visit the holy Father at Palmyria."

Mrs. Wilson held out her hand. "Harry O'Dule," she said, her voice unsteady, "I always knowed you had the makin's of a man in you. I'm gladder than I kin say."

Harry bowed low. Mrs. Wilson passed through the gate, beaming commendation on him from misty eyes. He closed the gate slowly, his clean shaven, wrinkled face working. He stood and watched her until the bend in the road hid her. Then, placing his tall hat jauntily on his grizzled locks, he turned and walked smartly in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER XX

BILLY MEETS A LOVELY GHOST

Billy found Croaker just where he thought he would be — clinging to the latch of the menagerie door and peering with one black eye through the chink above it at the owls, the while he hurled guttural insults at them.

“Croaker,” commanded his master, “get away from there!”

Croaker balanced himself by flopping one short wing and laughed at the hisses of the angered owls. He hopped from his perch to the peak of the shanty as Billy reached for him and there he sat, demurely turning his head from one side to the other and muttering low in his throat.

“Croaker, come down here, I want’a ask you something.” Billy’s hand went into his pocket and the crow stood at attention. Then as the hand came away empty he emitted an angry croak and wobbled further along the ridge-board.

“Come, nice old Croaker, tell me where you found the gold,” coaxed Billy.

Croaker turned his back and murmured a whole string of “cero-corrs,” which to Billy meant just as plain as words could say it that he hadn’t the slightest intention of telling anything.

“All right then, Croaker, I’ll call Ringdo, an’ feed him your dinner.”

Now, for the swamp-coon, Croaker had all the jealousy and hatred a crow is capable of feeling and as a last resort, whenever he was obdurate and disobedient as he

was now, his master could nearly always bring him to submission by the mere mention of Ringdo's name. At Billy's threat Croaker raised his head and poured forth such a jargon of heart-broken lamentation that the listening owls inside crouched low in terror, their amber eyes questioning the meaning of the awful sound.

Billy bent and patted an imaginary something on the ground. "Good ol' Ringdo," he said. "Nice ol' Ringdo." That was the last straw. With a croak of anguish Croaker swooped down and lit on his master's shoulder. Promptly five fingers gripped his feet.

"Now, you black beggar, I've got you," exulted Billy. This fact did not seem to worry Croaker in the least. His beady eyes were busy searching for signs of his enemy. Ringdo being nowhere visible, his neck feathers gradually lowered and his heavy beak closed. He snuggled close against Billy's face and told him in throaty murmurs how much he loved him. Billy laughed, and seating himself on a log, placed the crow on his knees.

"Croaker," he addressed the bird, "you must'a found ol' Scroggie's gold. He had the only gold money this country ever saw, so you must have found it some way. I don't s'pose it'll do Teacher Stanhope any good, 'cause it'll go to Jim Scroggie's father, but, Croaker, it's up to us to get that money an' turn it over; hear me?"

Croaker blinked and seemed to be thinking hard.

"You see," Billy went on, "maybe the will 'll be where the gold is. You be a real good feller an' show me where you found the gold-piece."

"Sure I will," agreed Croaker. He hopped down and started pigeon-toeing across the glade, peering back to see if Billy were coming.

Billy followed slowly, hoping, fearing, trusting that

Croaker's intentions were of the best. The crow was carrying on a murmured conversation with himself, flapping his wings, nodding his head sagely and in other ways manifesting his eagerness to accommodate his master. When he grew tired of walking he flew and Billy had to run to keep him in sight. Straight through the grove, across the green valley and on through the stumpy fallow went the crow, Billy panting and perspiring behind. Straight on to the pine-hedged creek and still on, until the lonely pine grove of the haunted house came into view.

"Oh, Jerusalem!" gasped Billy, "An' me without my rabbit foot charm." He realized where Croaker was leading him—straight to the haunted house. He wiped his streaming face on his sleeve and determined he'd go through with it.

Croaker paused for a moment in the edge of the grove to look back at Billy. The bird was plainly excited; his wings were spread, his neck feathers erect, and his raucous voice was scattering nesting birds from the evergreens in flocks.

With wildly beating heart Billy passed through the pines, the twilight gloom adding to his feeling of awe. Croaker had become strangely silent and now flitted before him like a black spirit of a crow. It was almost a relief when at last the tumble-down shack grew up in its tangle of vines and weeds. Once more into the daylight and Croaker took up the interrupted thread of his conversation with himself. He ducked and side-stepped and gave voice to expressions which Billy had never heard him use before.

"I wish he'd shut up," he murmured to himself, "but I'm scared to make him, fer fear he'll get sulky an' quit cold on the job."

Croaker, mincing in and out among the rag-weeds, led

straight across the yard to a tiny ramshackle building which at one time might have been a root-house. Billy, feeling that at any moment an icy hand might reach out and grip his windpipe, followed. It was a terrible risk he was running but the prize was worth it. His feet seemed weighted with lead. At last he reached the root-house and leaned against it, dizzy and panting. Then he looked about for Croaker. The crow had vanished!

A thrill of alarm gripped Billy's heart-strings. Where had Croaker disappeared to? What if old Scroggie's ghost had grabbed him and cast over him the cloak of invisibility? Then in all likelihood *he* would be the next to feel that damp, clutching shroud.

Suddenly his fears vanished. Croaker's voice, high-pitched and jubilant, had summoned him from somewhere on the other side of the building. As quickly as the weeds and his lagging feet would permit Billy joined him. Croaker was standing erect on a pile of old bottles, basking in the radiance of the colored lights which the sun drew from them. Undoubtedly in his black heart he felt that his master would glory in this glittering pile even as he gloried in it; for was there not in this heap of dazzling old bottles light enough to make the whole world glad?

But Billy gazed dully at the treasure with sinking heart and murmured: "You danged old humbug, you!" Croaker was surprised, indignant, hurt. He reached down and struck one of the shiniest of the bottles with his beak but even the happy tinkle that ensued failed to rouse enthusiasm in his master.

"O Croaker," groaned Billy, "why won't you find the gold fer me?" Croaker returned his master's look of reproach with beady, insolent eyes. "Cawrara-cawrara-cawrara," he murmured, backing from the pile, which

meant, "Why don't you carry one of these beautiful shiny things home for me? Isn't that what I brought you here to do?"

Then, his master still remaining blind to the wealth of treasure disclosed to him, Croaker spread his wings and sailed away over the pine-tops. Billy, despair in his heart, followed. All fear of the supernatural was gone from him now, crowded out by bitter disappointment at his failure to find the hidden gold. He passed close beside the haunted house without so much as a thought of the ghost of the man who had owned it and on through the silent pines and shadowy, grave-yard silence.

Then, just as he drew near to the edge of the grove, he caught his breath in terror and the cold sweat leaped out on his fear-blanchèd face. Drifting directly toward him white as driven snow, came the ghost. It was bearing straight down upon him! His knees grew weak, refused to hold him, and he sagged weakly against a tree. He closed his eyes and waited for the end.

Billy had heard that when one comes face to face with death the misdeeds of the life about to go out crowd into one brief second of darting reality before one. He had never quite believed it but he believed it now. If only he might have his misspent life to live over again! Never again would he steal Deacon Ringold's melons or swap broken-backed, broken-bladed jack-knives for good ones with the Sand-sharks, nor frighten his brother Anson with tales of witches and goblins. But that chance was not for him. It was, perhaps, natural that his last earthly thought would be of *her*. Her sweet face shone through the choking mists — her trembling lips were murmuring a last "good bye." Did she know what a wonderful influence her entrance into his heart had exerted toward his reform?

With an effort he opened his eyes. The white, gliding thing was almost upon him now. He tried to shake off frozen terror and run. He could not move a muscle. He groaned and shut his eyes tight, waiting for the icy touch of a spirit-hand. It found him after what seemed an eternity of waiting—but it was very soft and warm instead of clammy and cold and the voice which spoke his name was not in the least sepulchral.

“ Billy.”

A long shiver ran through his tense frame. He opened his eyes slowly. *She* stood before him! Yes there was no doubt of it, *she* was there, blue eyes smiling into his, warm fingers sending a thrill through his numbed being.

He tried to speak, tried to pronounce her name, but the effort was a failure. All he could do was to drink in her perfect loveliness. More than ever like an angel she looked, standing all in white in the blue-dark gloom of the grove, her hair glowing like a halo above the deep pools of her eyes.

“ Billy,” she spoke again, “ are you sick? ”

With a supreme effort of will he shook off his numbness and the red flush of shame wiped the pallor from his cheeks. What would she think of him if she knew? The very anguish of the thought spurred him to play the part of hypocrite. It was despicable, he knew, but what man has not had to play it, sooner or later, in the great game of love?

“ Fell out o’ a tree,” he managed to say. “ Struck my head on a limb.”

“ Oh! ” she cried commiseratingly. She came closer to him — so close that her very nearness made him dizzy with joy. With a tiny handkerchief she wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Come out into the light and let me see where you hurt yourself," she said, oh so gently.

"I don't think it left any mark," Billy stammered. "Anyways, I feel a whole lot better now. It was foolish for me to climb that tall tree. I didn't have to do it."

"Then why did you do it?" They were out into the hardwoods by now, in a long valley strewn with a net-work of sunbeams and shadows and he saw a hint of reproach in her big eyes as she asked the question. His heart leaped with sheer joy. She might just as well have said, "You have no right to run risks, now that you have me to consider."

They sat down on a mossy log. Her fingers brushed back his hair as her eyes sought vainly for marks or bruises.

"I asked you why you climbed the tree, Billy?"

Billy's mind worked with lightning speed.

"There was a little cedar bird's nest in a tall pine," he explained. "I saw a crow black bird fly out of it, and knew she had laid her egg in that nest."

"But why should she lay her egg in the cedar bird's nest; hasn't she a nest of her own?" asked Lou.

"No, crow black birds are too lazy to build nests. They take the first nest comes handy."

She looked her wonder. "But, Billy, you'd think they would want to enjoy building their own homes, wouldn't you?"

Billy shook his head. "The crow black bird don't want to be bothered with hatchin' an' feedin' her own young. That's why she lays in other bird's nests," he explained. "She jest lays her egg an' beats it out o' there. The other poor little bird waits for her to go. Then she goes back to her nest, glad enough to find it hasn't been torn to bits."

"And you mean to tell me that she hatches the egg laid by the mean, bad black bird, Billy?"

"Yep, she does jest that. She don't seem to know any better. Birds an' animals are queer that way. Why, even a weasel'll nurse a baby rabbit along with her own kittens if its hungry."

The girl's eyes grew wider and wider with wonderment. "Isn't it strange?" she half whispered, "and beautiful?"

"It's mighty queer," Billy confessed. "But you see, if that little bird was wise, she'd scoop that crow black bird's egg out o' her nest, instead of hatchin' it."

"Why?"

"Because when the egg's hatched, the little black bird is so much stronger an' bigger than the cedar birdies he takes most of the feed the old birds bring in. He starves the other little birds an' crowds 'em clean out o' the nest."

"Then it was brave of you to risk climbing that tall tree to frighten that crow bird away," declared Lou. The admiration and commendation in the blue eyes watching him was more than Billy could endure.

"Say!" he burst out. "I lied to you, Lou, I didn't fall out o' no tree, I was jest scared plum stiff when you found me, that's all."

He hung his head and braced himself to meet what was justly coming to him. She would despise him now, he knew. He felt a gentle touch on his arm, and raised his face slowly. The girl's red lips were smiling. He could scarcely believe his eyes.

"I'm glad you told me, Billy," she said. "I—I hoped you might."

"Then you knowed I was scared?" he cried in wonder.

She nodded. "I suppose I should have called to you, but I had forgotten what I had heard about this grove

being haunted and that I was dressed all in white. But when I came to you and saw your face I knew that you were frightened."

"Frightened! Oh gollies, I was so scared that I chattered my teeth loose. But honest Injun, Lou, I don't scare easy. I wouldn't like you to think that I'm a scare-cat about real things. I'm jest scared of ghosts, that's all."

Lou knit her brows in thought. "No," she disagreed, "if you had been that frightened you would not have come to the grove at all."

Billy looked his relief. "I don't think I'm quite as bad as I used to be," he said. "Why say, there was a time when you couldn't get me inside that grove. But lately I've been feelin' different about it. I don't s'pose there re'lly is such a thing as a ghost, is there?"

"No," she replied, "there's no such thing as a ghost, Billy."

A red squirrel came scampering across the open sod before them, pausing as he sensed their presence, then springing to the trunk of a sapling the better to look them over.

"Oh look at the dear little thing," cried the girl. "What do you suppose he's saying?" as the squirrel broke into a shrill chatter.

"Why he's callin' us all the mean things he knows, I guess," laughed Billy. "We're in his way, you see."

"Then let's get out of his way. I suppose he thinks we have no business here and maybe he's right. Where shall we go, Billy?"

Billy thought a moment. "Say, how'd you like to go out in my punt, on Levee Crick? I kin show you some cute baby mushrats an' some dandy black-birds' nests. It's not far away. We go 'cross that big fallow and through a

strip o' hardwoods an' then we climb a stump fence — an' there's the crick. It's an awful fine crick, an' plumb full of bass an' pike. Say, will you go? "

He leaned toward her, waiting for her answer. His heart was singing with joy — joy that spilled out of his grey eyes and made his lips smile in spite of him. What a sweet and grand privilege it would be to carry this wonderful girl, who had so transformed his world, along the familiar by-ways that held such rare treasures of plant and wild life.

She was looking away across the forest to a strip of fleecy cloud drifting across the deep azure of the sky.

"I should like to go," she said at length, "if you are sure you don't think I will be a bother."

"Bother!" Billy's pulses were leaping, his soul singing. He reached down a hand and trustingly she put her's in it. Very soft and cool it felt to Billy's hot palm, as he assisted her from the log. Then side by side they passed down through the long green valley.

CHAPTER XXI

A DAY WITH THE DUCKS

Erie Landon faced her father across the breakfast table, dimpled chin cupped in her brown hand. It was early morning; a red sun was just lifting above the Point to wipe away the white mists of the channel and the bay. The American yacht which had put into harbor the night before had cleared and was now but a white speck in the distance.

"She ought to make Cleveland before dark if this breeze holds," the light-house keeper said as he twisted the big cigar which the commodore had given him about in his fingers. "Just what word was it that lawyer chap, Maddoc, wanted us to get to Swanson, at the foot, Erie?"

"Why, he asked us to tell Swanson that he and a friend are coming to his place to stay for a couple of weeks duck-shooting, Daddy," Erie answered.

"When?"

"Early in October, Mr. Maddoc said."

"Humph! It does beat all what foolish ideas them big guns take. Think of them two comin' all the way from Cleveland here just to shoot ducks. Old man Swanson knows his book, too. He charges them sports awful prices; nine dollars a week each and makes 'em sleep two in a bed at that; and every fall that old ramblin' house of his is chuck kerbang full of shooters."

Landon was much improved in health. He spoke with little effort, the hollows in his cheeks were filling and his eyes were brighter than the girl had seen them for many

a day. He gazed longingly down at the cigar, then glancing up to catch his daughter's reproachful look, sighed and laid it on the table.

"I'd love to smoke it," he confessed, "but you needn't worry, Chick. I'm through with tobacco till I'm my real self ag'in. But I feel so darned much better since I quit smokin' I simply want to smoke all the more."

"Poor old Daddy," Erie laughed, coming around to sit on the arm of his chair. "It does seem too bad you can't have your smoke. I'm sure you miss it dreadfully; but you see you are so much stronger and better I — well, I simply won't let you smoke just yet, that's all."

His face had brightened at the sound of her laughter. Now he patted her hand, as his eyes sought the window. Perhaps the old songs would come back even as the laughter had come and surprise him. Perhaps she was forgetting Stanhope. But no, much as he desired that this should be, he knew her too well for that.

With his eyes on the white sail, now a tiny dot on the horizon, his mind went back to that scene of a month ago, when he had told her of Hinter's proposal and of his consent to it. He would never quite forget the look that came into her face.

"I could never marry Hinter," she had said. "I love one man — and to him I shall be true, always."

"But he is blind, child. He has given you up," Landon had reasoned. And with her face aglow she had answered. "He is blind, but he can never give me up, because he loves me."

Reading in the dry, suffering eyes she had turned upon him a purpose stronger than life itself, what could he do but take her in his arms and ask her to forgive him for the old meddler he was? Perhaps he had erred in this.

He did not want to think so. But she looked so much like her mother that morning it might be —

“Daddy.”

He came out of his abstraction with a start and glanced at her, almost guiltily. “Yes, Chick.”

“Have you told Mr. Hinter yet?” she asked suddenly.

“Yes,” he answered. “I told him that same day. Told him that you said you could never be more to him than what you now are. Why do you ask, Erie?”

“I have wondered why he keeps coming here,” she said slowly. “You scarcely need his companionship, now you are busy with your duties. But there,” she broke off with a smile, “I have no right to doubt his sincerity; I am sure he has never spoken one word to me that he should not speak and I know he is really fond of you.”

Landon knit his shaggy brows. “I don’t know, Chick. I’m afraid he still hopes. He has as much as told me so. ‘We’ve been too hasty with her,’ he said, ‘we must have patience.’”

Erie’s face went very white. “He mustn’t come here any more,” she said quickly. “With your permission I shall tell him so, Daddy.”

He was silent for a time. “Just as you like,” he said at length. “If his comin’ annoys you, dear, you tell him so.”

She bent and kissed him. “Best Daddy ever was,” she whispered. Then jumping up she ran to the stove and put the kettle on.

“I saw Billy Wilson yesterday when I was out sailing,” she called, “and he had the sweetest little girl with him. Her name is Lou Scroggie and I fell in love with her on sight.”

“Billy with a girl!” cried Landon in wonder.

“ Yes. They were out in Billy’s punt, gathering water-lilies, and, oh Daddy, they seemed so happy. I could have hugged them both. Billy told me that he and Maurice Keeler were going shooting ducks this morning and I asked him to come over here for breakfast as usual. The marsh shooting is all over by sunrise, you know.”

Her father nodded. “ I’ll bet a cookie that was Billy’s old muzzle loader I heard down in the duck-ponds about daylight,” he laughed. “ Maybe,” he added hopefully, “ he’ll fetch us a brace of ducks.”

“ Why, there he is now,” she cried, glancing through the window. “ Maurice isn’t with him, though. I know that old punt as far as I can see it. I must get the potatoes and bacon on; he’ll be hungry as a bear.”

Landon put on his hat and went down to the beach to welcome their visitor. “ Well, Billy,” he called as the punt appeared around the bend in the shore, “ how many ducks did old Liza-Ann drop out of the sky this mornin’? ”

“ Two greys and a mallard,” Billy answered over his shoulder. “ Could ’a killed more, but what’s the use. They wouldn’t keep; weather’s too warm.”

“ Well now, I can’t see why a dozen wouldn’t keep as well as three,” returned the keeper, as he pulled the punt high on shore.

“ They would, I s’pose,” laughed Billy as he stepped out, followed by Moll, the little spaniel, “ but these three don’t have to keep long; you see we’re goin’ to have these fer dinner.”

“ Are we now? ” Landon rubbed his hands and smacked his lips in anticipation. “ You’re goin’ to stay and help clean up on ’em, Billy? ”

“ Yep, I’ll stay. I’m goin’ to paint Erie’s skiff fer her. I’ll slip into the ponds ag’in on my way to the Settlement

an' kill enough ducks fer our folks an' the neighbors."

Erie was waving to him from the kitchen door. "Where's Maurice?" she called.

"His Ma wouldn't let him come. Afraid he'd get wet an' go sick ag'in. Gee! that coffee smells good, Erie."

"Go 'long in and tackle it while it's hot," advised Landon. "I'll start in on pluckin' these birds. But first we'll have to let Chick see 'em. Say, Billy, they're nigh as big as tame 'uns!"

Erie clasped her hands in ecstasy at sight of the wild ducks. "Oh, aren't they lovely!" she cried. "Put them in the ice-house, Daddy, until Billy starts for home."

Billy, who had squared away at his breakfast, spoke with his mouth full. "We're goin' to have 'em fer dinner," he informed his hostess.

"But, Billy," she remonstrated, "they'll be expecting you to bring some ducks home, you know."

"Billy says he'll shoot some more this evenin'," spoke up her father, who did not intend to allow anything to interfere with a duck dinner if he could help it.

"These ducks wouldn't keep till I get home," said Billy.

"No," supported Landon, "weather's too warm, you see, Chick. I'll start in on dressin' 'em right now," he chuckled, exchanging winks with Billy.

"You're a pair of plotters," cried Erie, "and being a weak, helpless girl I suppose I'll have to agree with you and submissively roast those birds to suit your taste."

"You'll find onions and savory hangin' to the rafters upstairs," suggested her father as he carried the ducks outside.

Erie sat down opposite to Billy, and watched him while he ate. He smiled across at her. "Your Dad seems a whole lot better," he said.

"Yes, ever so much. He's almost his old self again. He has quit smoking, you see, and he has promised me not to smoke until he is quite well again."

Billy laid down his knife and fork and smiled reminiscently. "I was jest thinkin' of ol' Harry O'Dule," he said, answering the question in her eyes. "He's quit a bad habit, too. He's quit drinkin'; don't touch a drop any more — hasn't fer over a month now."

"Oh isn't that splendid," cried the girl. "He's such a dear old fellow when he's sober. Do you suppose he'll be strong enough to give up drink altogether, Billy?"

"Well, he seems to be in earnest about it. I re'lly don't think he'll drink any more. He says that he's got his tin whistle an' his cat an' don't need whisky. He's changed wonderful, there's no mistake about that. Ma saw him yesterday. He was dressed in his Prince Albert an' plug hat, an' Ma says he was that changed she didn't know him at first."

Erie laughed softly, "I know very well you've had a hand in his reform, Billy," she said.

"Nope," denied Billy, "but I ain't sayin' but that my owls an' snakes might have played a part in it." And he proceeded to relate the deception he had practiced on Harry while the old man was in his cups.

The girl clapped her hands in joy at the story. "And you let him think he had the delirium tremens! Oh, Billy, is there anything you wouldn't do, I wonder?"

Billy shook his head. "I dunno," he replied. "That's a hard question to answer."

Silence fell between them. He knew that she was thinking that last year on the opening morning of the duck season Frank Stanhope had sat at this table with him. She was gazing from the window, far down to where the Point

was lost in the Settlement forests. He saw her bosom rise and fall, saw a tear grow up in her eyes and roll unheeded down her cheek.

In boyish sympathy his hand reached out to clasp the slender brown one clenched upon the white cloth. He longed to ask her if what the Settlement was saying — that she was going to marry Hinter — was true. And then as quickly as the thought itself came shame of it. His hand clasped her hand more tightly.

“He went with me to the foot of the Causeway last night, ag’in,” he said softly.

She turned and the blood mounted swiftly to her white cheeks. “And did he feel the light again, Billy?” she whispered eagerly.

“He felt the light,” said the boy, “an’ he sang all the way back home.”

“Oh!” she cried and hid her face on her arms.

Billy arose hastily, saying something about helping her father with the ducks and went outside. He found Landon seated on a soap-box behind the boat house, industriously stripping the ducks of their feathers.

“Say,” said the man as Billy came up, “you know when ducks put on an extra coverin’ of feathers a hard winter is in sight? Well, by gosh, these birds have all put on an extra undershirt. Look,” holding the duck in his hands up for inspection. “How’s that for a coat o’ down?”

“It sure is heavy,” agreed Billy. “I saw another sure sign over there in the ponds that says it’s goin’ to be a hard winter, one I’ve never knowed to fail. It was the mushrat houses. The rats are throwin’ ’em up mighty big an’ thick.”

“And warm, I’ll bet.”

“Yep, an’ warm. We’re sure to have a rough fall an’ a humdinger of a winter.”

“And I s’pose a rough fall means good duckin’?” laughed Landon. “Oh, by the way, Billy, before I forget. Would you mind runnin’ in to old Swanson’s landin’ on your way home and tellin’ him that a couple of fellers from Cleveland are comin’ to his place early next month to shoot. They were here last night. One of em’s a lawyer named Maddoc an’ he give me this money to pass on to Swanson, so’s the old codger would be sure and hold a room for ’em.”

He felt in his vest pocket and fished out a ten dollar note, which he handed to Billy. “Maddoc and a party of other men were cruisin’ in a yacht. They docked here last night,” he explained. “Left at sunup for Cleveland.”

“I saw the yacht leave the pier,” said Billy. “She sure was a dandy, wasn’t she?”

“Never saw finer lines than her’s,” agreed Landon. “You’re sure you don’t mind gettin’ that word to Swanson now, Billy?”

“Not a bit. I’ll run in to his dock tonight, an’ tell him.”

“Good. There, thank goodness this job of pluckin’s done at last.” Landon rose, rubbed his cramped legs and gathered the stripped ducks up by the necks. “We’ll leave the rest to Erie,” he chuckled. “This is about as far as she ever lets me go. Comin’ in?”

Billy shook his head. “I’ve got a skiff to paint ’fore three o’clock this afternoon,” he said, “so I best get busy. Tell Erie not to ferget to blow the fog-horn when the ducks are done.”

Landon went on slowly to the kitchen. With his hand on the door-latch he paused and a smile lit his seamed face.

Above the clatter of dishes came a girl's sweet soprano:

"Her voice was low and sweet,
And she's all the world to me,
And for bonnie Annie Laurie
I'd lay me down and dee."

"I knowed it," whispered the man, softly. "I knowed the old songs would come back ag'in. Billy must have had somethin' to do with it; I'll bet a cookie he had!" He opened the door gently and entered. He placed the ducks on the table and softly withdrew again.

* * * * *

It was late afternoon when Billy stepped into his punt and with swift, strong strokes sent it skimming toward the duck-ponds. At the point where the shore curved abruptly he lifted his hat and waved to the man and girl watching him from the pier.

Moll looked up into his face and whined. "Don't worry, girlye," Billy told her, "we're goin' on, but we're comin' back ag'in soon an' have another o' Erie's duck dinners, an' Teacher Stanhope's goin to be with us, don't you ferget that."

As he spoke, he saw another boat round the distant grass-point and put into Jerunda cut, the entrance to the main pond. The smile left his face. "Beat us to it, Moll," he sighed to the spaniel whose brown eyes had also glimpsed the skiff. "They'll be set by the time we get in an' they've got the pick of the ponds, no use denyin' that. We'll have to portage 'cross to a back slough an' all the ducks we'll get a chance at are them they miss. Well, cheer up," as the dog, sensing the disgust in his voice, growled deep in her throat.

Reaching the cut Billy found the other shooters having some difficulty in getting their heavy skiff through the shallow and deceptive water, a feat which only one who was used to navigating could hope to accomplish successfully. At the same time he noted, with a start, that the men in the skiff were the mysterious drillers, Tom and Jack.

"Hello, you!" he shouted. "You'll have to back up an' take the run to your left."

The larger of the two men grunted a surly response and with much pushing and swearing they began to laboriously back out of the blind channel. Billy and Moll watched them, the dog growling her antagonism of the interlopers. As the skiff passed his bow Billy noted that the guns lying across the seat were both of the new breech-loading pattern.

The occupants of the skiff cast a contemptuous look at his old muzzle-loader, as they passed, and one of them laughed and said something in an aside to his companion.

"Do you expect to kill any ducks with that old iron?" he sneered, looking hard at Billy.

Billy felt his cheeks turn hot. "I might," he returned, "an' ag'in, I mightn't."

"That's one on you, Tom," laughed the man named Jack. "Quit roasting the kid. We'd have been mired yet if it hadn't been for him."

Tom allowed a shade of amiability to creep into his tones as he said: "First time we ever shot these grounds, and we're kinder green on the ins and outs of 'em. We're drillin' fer water down in the Settlement. Lost our drill this mornin' and had to send across the lake fer a fishin' outfit, so thought we'd put in the time shootin' a bit."

Billy made no reply.

"Neeborly, ain't he?" growled Tom to his companion.

"Niece, friendly sorter youngsters they raise on this God forsaken spot, I say."

"He thinks you're guyin' him," said the other man. "How's he to know what you mean by 'fishin'-outfit?' He likely thinks you mean a rod and reel. Better push along and mind your own business. Next thing you're goin' to say is somethin' about 'shootin' a well,' and if Jacobs gets to hear of that kinder talk —"

They were moving off, and Billy did not hear the rest of the sentence. As they entered the main run, the smaller man called: "Hey, sonny, whereabouts is the best point in yonder?"

Billy gritted his teeth. He resented these strangers coming into his shooting grounds and acting as though they owned them. For them to expect him to show them just where the best point was to be found seemed to him to be going a whole lot too far. He disliked and distrusted them. From what he had seen and heard of them he believed they were the men who robbed the Twin Oaks store. He wanted to tell them so now, but something told him to curb his temper and act the part of a sport who could afford to make certain allowances.

"The best point's straight ahead of you," he answered. "You'll find a rush blind already built on it."

He picked up his paddle and followed in the wake of the other boat. The men were putting out their decoys as Billy passed the point.

"Say, you," called Tom, "if this is such an all-fired good spot it's a wonder you didn't take it yourself; you had lots of time to beat us to it, didn't you?"

"You was in the run first, wasn't you?" said Billy, coldly.

"Why, sure we was, but we were stuck tight. You

might have passed us, easy enough."

"Well, we don't play the game that way in these parts," said Billy and passed on, unheeding of the uncomplimentary names the chagrined driller threw after him.

Half way down the long pond he drew into shore and, pulling the punt after him through the tall rushes, made the portage across to the inner slough. It was a long, hard pull, but the track he laid would make the return portage much easier.

"Looks like a good feedin' place, Moll," he addressed the spaniel as he paddled slowly across to the far shore of the slough. "Good grass here fer hidin', too; but not much chance of findin' a down bird without a good dog, an' I've got her—eh girlie?"

Moll wagged her short tail gleefully.

"Now then, girlie, it's comin' on to flight-time, so we'll jest set out decoys right here." Billy picked up the wooden ducks and placed them as naturally as he knew how some twenty yards out from shore. As he drew the punt well up among the tall rushes he saw the first line of ducks drift in from the bay.

"Down, Moll!" he whispered, as he cocked the old muzzle-loader. "They're headin' straight in. Them driller fellers are goin' to get a chance to make a clean-up on that bunch, sure!"

Straight across the marsh, following the cut, the ducks came on, half a dozen big "blacks," with long necks outstretched and quick eyes seeking for feeding ones of their own kind. Then, suddenly, the leader gave a soft quack and Billy saw the flock swoop low.

"Oh, gollies! Right into their decoys," he groaned. "Now they'll give it to 'em, jest as they're settlin'."

A long, harrowing moment passed. Then quickly and

close together four shots rang out. Moll whined dolefully and Billy, peering through the rushes, gave a low whistle of surprise. "Didn't down a single bird," he muttered, "an' by gollies, they've sent 'em right across to us."

Almost simultaneously with his words the whistle of strong wings grew up and the six big blacks swept in, low over his decoys.

It was a sure hand that raised the old gun, a sure eye that glanced along its brown barrels. At the first loud report of the black powder the leader of the flock crumpled up and the second in command drifted sidewise from the flock. The left barrel spoke and a third duck twisted from the remainder of the flock, to fall with a splash into the water.

Moll, whose eyes had never left the second bird down, had slipped quietly away through the rushes. Billy, having launched the punt and retrieved the two birds on the water, found her waiting for him on shore, the dead duck in her mouth. He patted her brown side and spoke a word of commendation to her; then quickly he reloaded.

The sun was almost on the western horizon now and the ducks were beginning to come in fast, most of them from off the bay; consequently the shooters in the front pond had always first chance. But Billy knew they were having little or no success. Every duck that offered itself as a target to them he saw almost as soon as they did and although the report of their guns sounded at quick intervals the ducks seemed to keep on, straight across to where he crouched with the excited dog by his side.

By the time the sun had fallen behind the far rim of forest he was quite content with his evening's bag, which consisted of five blacks, a pair of greys, two blue winged teal, a pintail and a pair of green headed mallards.

Quickly he made the portage and crossed the pond into Jerunda. He could hear the other shooters ahead of him, speaking in profane tones of disgust at their luck. He found them waiting for him on the edge of the bay, but he kept right on paddling.

"What luck, sonny?" called the man, Tom, as he passed.

Billy told him of his bag.

The man swore and said something to his companion. "Hey, hold up! Want to sell part of them ducks?" he asked.

"Nope." Billy shipped his paddle and picked up his oars. Somehow he felt safer then. He believed that men like those behind were capable of almost any crime. What if they should make up their minds to have his ducks anyway? Well, they couldn't catch him now. There were two of them in a heavy skiff and he was alone in his light punt, so let them try it if they wanted to. But whatever might have been their thought, it was clear they knew better than pursue that swiftly moving boat. Quickly they fell behind him and were swallowed up in the deepening shadows.

CHAPTER XXII

TEACHER JOHNSTON RESIGNS

September passed laden with summer perfumes and song and, beneath a blanket of hoar frost, October awoke to send her hazy heralds far across wooded upland and open. Slowly those wreathing mists kissed leaf and fern, as though whispering: "Rest sweetly, until spring brings you back once again."

So it seemed to the boy, as from the brow of a hill he watched the dawn-haze drift toward the newly-open sun-gates of the eastern sky; for autumn always brought a feeling of sadness to Billy. He missed the twitter of the birds, the thousand and one notes of the wild things he loved and which always passed out and away from his world with the summer. The first hoar frost had come; soon the leaves would turn golden and crimson, the fern-clumps crumple and wither into sere, dead, scentless things. Then with shortening days and darkening skies those leaves and plants would sag to earth and the gaunt arms of the bare trees would lift empty nests toward snow-spitting skies.

No more would the fire-flies weave a gauze of golden stars above the marshlands at the foot of the Causeway. The season of green and blue had lived and died and in its place had been born a season of drab and brown. Summer was gone. The song-birds had migrated. Soon the green rush fields would sway, grey and dead and the bronze woodcocks would whistle away from the bog-lands, for seldom did they tarry after the first frost. Along the

creek the red-winged black-birds would be sounding their up-and-away notes. No happy carol to welcome the first glow of dawn! No wonder Billy sighed. Then he lifted his head quickly as, high above him, sounded the whistle of wings. Up from the north a wedgeshaped flock of wild ducks came speeding, white backs flashing as they pitched downward in unbroken formation towards the calling bay-waters.

Billy caught his breath quickly and a glad smile drove the shadow from his face. "Canvasbacks!" he murmured. "They've come early. I bet anythin' the flocks I heard comin' in through the night was canvasbacks, too—an' redhead! I must go right over after breakfast an' tell Teacher Stanhope; he'll be sure to say 'Let's go get 'em.' Oh, gee!"

He turned back toward the house, then paused as the mellow "whirt-o-whirt" of a quail sounded from the sumach which bordered the meadow across the road. "Old Cock quail," he cautioned softly, "I wouldn't give that covey-call too often if I was you. Joe Scraff jest might hear you. Only note safe fer you to whistle is 'Bob White'—but you won't be whistlin' that till spring comes ag'in."

It may be that the white-throated leader of the brown covey in the stubble sensed the murmured warning of his friend, for he did not whistle again. The smile still on his lips, Billy vaulted the rail fence and sought the path to the house.

He found his father, mother and Anson seated at the breakfast table and as he took his place he was conscious of a foreboding of impending storm. The conviction was strengthened when his father's foot, reaching sympathetically underneath the table, touched his ever so gently. With perfect sangfroid he speared a strip of bacon with his fork

and held his breath as he waited for the worst. Two taps of that foot meant "On your guard," three taps "Watch out for dodging."

He received two taps and sighed relievedly; then as his mother arose to bring the coffee-pot from the stove he felt three quick and distinct pressures and ducked his head just in time to miss a swinging, open-handed slap from Mrs. Wilson's heavy hand.

Anson, sitting slit-eyed and gleeful close beside him, received the slap with a force that knocked his face into his porridge bowl.

As Mrs. Wilson recovered her balance and squared away for a surer stroke, Croaker swooped in through the open door and, with many muffled croaks, alighted in the center of the table. In his black beak he held another glittering gold piece, which he dropped in front of Mrs. Wilson's plate. Then picking up a fat doughnut from the platter he hopped to the motto *God Bless Our Home* and perching himself on its gilt frame proceeded to appease his morning's hunger.

Silence fell upon the family after the first gasp of surprise at sight of the gold piece. Even Anson checked his wailing to sit with his pale eyes wider open than ever they had been before and it was he who broke the silence which had fallen—broke it with a husky, fear-ridden voice as he cried:

"Fer goodness sake, Ma, don't touch that gold! It's bewitched, I tell you!"

His mother glared at him. "Humph!" she snorted, "you're bewitched yourself, you poor coward you! Now then, another word out o' you—and you get the strap. Ain't I told you, Anson, time and ag'in, that this dear crow has found old Scroggie's pile? You git up from this

table to once; go out and stay within callin' distance; I'll want you back here presently."

She picked up the gold piece and, fondling it lovingly, waited until Anson had passed outside. Then with characteristic deliberation she placed it safely away beneath her saucer, thereby signifying that the incident was closed for the time being.

It was not until Billy had finished his breakfast and was about to slip quietly out that his mother spoke again. Then fixing him with cold, accusing eyes, she said: "I want 'a know what you had to do with scarin' the new teacher so he won't never come back to the Valley School ag'in, Willium."

Billy, who had anticipated what was coming, gave a well-feigned start.

"Why, Ma," he cried, in amazement, "you don't mean to say he's gone?"

"Yes, he's gone an' I s'pose you're satisfied, you and your outlaw companions in crime. Cobin Keeler stopped by this mornin' and he told us the teacher left his writ' resign in his hands. He declares he won't risk his life among a lot of young savages."

"I think that Mr. Johnston went a little too far there," Wilson ventured.

"You shet right up, Tom!" commanded his wife. "Ain't it nuthin' to you that your son grows up wild and uneducated?"

"But he had no right to call us savages, Ma," protested Billy.

"Oh, hadn't he then! Well, who up and deliberately stole his horse, I'd like to know?" Mrs. Wilson held her breath waiting for the answer.

"Nobody stole his horse," replied Billy. "The poor

thing was so lean an' hungry that it weaved when it walked; all we did was sneak it out o' the school-yard an' hide it where there was good pasture."

"Well, maybe that ain't stealin' it, but if it ain't what would you call it, Willium?"

"I'd call it bein' kind to dumb animals," spoke up Wilson, his eyes meeting the angry ones of his wife.

"Listen, Ma," said Billy gently. "That old Johnston was awful mean to us kids, there's no mistake about that. He whipped us fer nothin', an' what's worse, he was always sneerin' at us fer being low-born an' ignorant, an' that meant sayin' things ag'in our folks. But we was willin' to stand all that, cause we'd promised Teacher Stanhope that we'd do our best to put up with the teacher in his place. But, Ma, if you could a' seen that poor ol' horse, so starved that every rib showed like the ridges in your wash-board, lookin' over that school-yard fence at the long grass an' beggin' with his hungry eyes fer jest a bite —"

Billy paused and rolled a bread crumb. When he looked up his eyes were dark. "Anse has told you that it was me who sneaked him out o' the yard, an' led him away where he could feed an' rest an' get the sores made by the hard saddle an' hickory healed, an' Anse didn't lie fer once. I did do it, an' I'd do it ag'in.

"What's more, Ma, that ol' horse is goin' to stay right where he is, belly-deep in clover, till it gets so cold we'll have to stable him. Then he's goin' to have all the good hay an' oats he wants."

Mrs. Wilson could scarcely believe her ears. "You don't mean that havin' took him you had any thoughts of keepin' him, Willium?" she managed to say.

"Yes, Ma'am; I mean jest that. You see, Ma, that ol'

horse don't belong to Teacher Johnston any more. We bought him."

"Bought him!" exclaimed man and woman in a breath.

Billy nodded. "Me an' Jim Scroggie bought him from Mr. Johnston, an' we got a receipt provin' our ownership, too, you bet. This is how we did it. 'Long 'bout the second er third day after ol' Thomas disappeared me an' Jim met up with Johnston walkin' home from school to Fairfield where he boards. Jim had fifty dollars, all his own, an' we'd planned jest what we'd say to the teacher.

"First off when he sees us, he asks us if we'd happened to find any tracks of his horse. It was funny to see his snakey eyes callin' us liars at every polite word we said to him. Finally he comes right out flat-footed an' tells us that he knows we had somethin' to do with ol' Thomas wanderin' off, an' he says he's goin' to make our fathers pay fer his loss."

"Course we got real scared then—leastwise Johnston thought we was—an' Jim he ups an' tells him that we fergot to latch the gate an' let the horse out. Then Johnston got real mean—meaner than I ever see him get, an' that's sayin' quite a lot. He said he would turn back with us an' interview—that's the word he used, whatever it means—interview our fathers.

"Then Jim he begged him not to do that. 'We'll pay you whatever's right fer your horse, sir,' he says, but Johnston jest snorted. 'Where would you get fifty dollars!' he says, but Jim, he nudged me to keep quiet, an' said: 'I've got fifty dollars of my very own, right here, sir. We'll buy your horse an' take chances on findin' him, if you'll sell him to us.'

"'Gimme the money,' says Johnston.

"So we give him the money but we made him give us

what Jim calls a regular bill o' sale receipt fer it. An' so, you see, Ma, we've got Mr. Johnston there, an' he won't ever lay the rod on poor ol' Thomas no more."

Mrs. Wilson, arms folded on the white table-cloth, was gazing out of the window now. Perhaps she saw a poor old horse, belly deep in luscious grass, making up for the fasts of hard and stern days, mercifully behind it forever now and enjoying life to the full—the new life which Billy had helped to purchase.

At any rate, her voice had lost much of its harshness as she asked: "But what about the wild animal that broke into the school an' tore the teacher's clothes fair off his back an' chased him up the road? That's the thing that scared him so he quit the school ferever. Now, Willium, what did you have to do with that?"

Billy sat silent, striving to keep back the grin that would come in spite of him. Wilson, on pretext of getting his pipe, got up and left the room.

"I'm waitin', Willium."

"Well, Ma, you see ol' Ringdo got out of his cage yesterday mornin'. I've kept him shut up a lot an' what with feedin' on meat an' rich stuff that old swamp coon was playfuller than usual, I guess. It seems Teacher Johnston had took a notion to get down to the school at eight o'clock instead of nine as he usually does. When Teacher Stanhope taught school Ringdo used t' often go there an' get apples an' stuff that the teacher saved for him. Yesterday when he got loose he must've been lonesome fer Mr. Stanhope, an' he went to the school. He got in an' found Johnston alone, I guess, an' maybe tried to get friendly. Mr. Johnston must have kicked him er hit him. All I know about it is what I seen fer myself.

"I was goin' down the path to the road, Anse with me,

when the teacher went past, runnin' fer all he was worth. Come to think of it his coat had been clawed some, an' I remember now his face was bleedin' from a scratch er two. He didn't see us an' he didn't stop. He kept right on goin'. Anse an' me went on to the school, an' there we found Ringdo jest finishin' the teacher's lunch. I brought him back an' put him in his cage. That's all, Ma, an' it's every blessed word true."

Mrs. Wilson remained thoughtful. Billy, watchin' her with furtive speculation, hoped from the relaxing lines in her brow that all was well with the world once more. Hope became an assurance with her next words.

"You kin have that Jim Scroggie over to supper tonight, Willium, if you want to."

Billy's heart jumped with joy. He wanted to hug his mother, but restrained the desire and sat gazing pensively at his plate.

"What's the matter, don't you want him?" asked his mother. "I thought maybe you'd like to have him, seein' you're such cronies an' there must be some good in him in spite of his looks. I could have them partridges that Joe Scraff sent over roasted with bacon strips across 'em, an' baked potatoes, an' maybe I might boil an apple dumplin'."

Billy sighed. "That's awful good of you, Ma, an' I sure would like to have Jim over to supper, but he's so fond of his sister he won't go anywheres without her, you see."

"Well," flared his mother, "can't he fetch her along with him, if he wants to? What's to hinder him from fetchin' her? She's a sweet little thing an' I'd be proud to have her."

Billy closed his eyes and took tight hold of his chair seat. He knew that if he did not summon all his self restraint

he would surely spoil all he had accomplished through strategy. He longed to swoop down on his mother and hug her, slap her on the back and yell in her ear that she was a brick. But experience had taught him caution. And besides, Billy reasoned, there was still something more to be accomplished.

"I say we kin have Louie over, too, Willium," Mrs. Wilson suggested once again.

"Yep, we could do that, I s'pose," said Billy, "only —" He frowned and shook his head. "I guess we best not ask either of 'em, Ma. Maurice might hear of it, an' wonder why he wa'n't asked too. He's awful funny that way, you know."

"Why, sakes alive!" cried his mother, "I never give Maurice a thought. O' course we'll have him, too. An' if there happens to be anybody else you'd like, you best say so now, Willium."

"I'd awful like to have Harry O'Dule, too."

Mrs. Wilson caught her breath, but whatever objections her mind raised against the last named remained unuttered. All she said was. "This is your party, Willium. Anybody else, now?"

"Elgin Scraff," spoke up Billy, promptly.

Mrs. Wilson looked out of the window and considered. "Let's see. That leaves little Louie the only girl among all of you boys, so we'll jest have to have another girl er two. How'd you like to have Ann Spencer and Phoebe Scraff?"

Billy agreed with delight.

Mrs. Wilson pushed back her chair and arose from the table. "Now, then, Willium, you get along out. I've got a whole lot to do afore supper-time, and I guess maybe you best run across and ask Mrs. Keeler to come over and

help me. You kin go 'round and give the invites to your friends."

She picked up the saucer and stood looking down at the gold piece which Croaker had brought in. "I don't s'pose there's a particle of use keepin' an eye on that crow?" she asked.

"Haven't I been keepin' an eye on him?" cried Billy, "an' you see what he does. Jest as soon as I turn my back he plays sharp. I've done my best to get him to show me where he finds that gold, but he won't do it. But I'll catch him yet. I'll jest run along an' see what he's at now; he's so quiet I know he's into some mischief."

He picked up his hat and bounded outside. He found Croaker seated on the chicken yard fence, gravely surveying his ancient and mortal enemy, the old game cock, and whispering guttural insults that fairly made the rooster bristle with anger.

Billy shook his fist at the crow. "You old beggar," he said fondly, "if that rooster was wise he'd go out with the rest of the chickens an' scratch his breakfast, 'stead' o' quarrelin' with you. He don't know that you're doin' your best to starve him to death."

Billy knew that Croaker would hang close to his enemy all morning and feeling reasonably sure that no further trips to the hidden treasure would be made during his absence on his mother's errand he started for Keeler's. At the road gate he met Cobin coming in, a pitchfork on his shoulder. Keeler and Billy's father "changed works" during wheat and corn harvest, and the former was coming over to help haul in fodder.

"Ho, Billy!" he boomed, gripping the lad's arm in his huge hand, "you won't steal Maurice away from the work I've set him to do this mornin', I'll be bound. Back to the

house you come with me, young man. I want Maurice to finish his job."

"I don't want Maurice," Billy hastened to explain. "Ma wants Missus Keeler to come over an' give her a hand, so I'm on my way to tell her. Honest, Mr. Keeler, that's right."

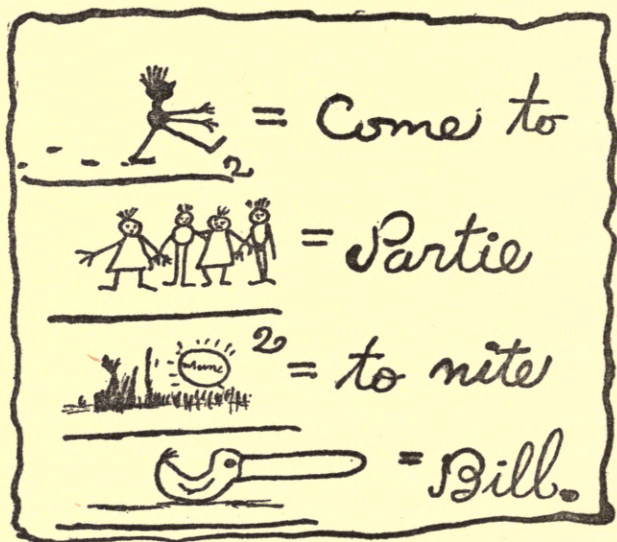
"By Jimminy, you've fooled me so many times, Billy, I have an idea you might jest do it ag'in." Mr. Keeler's grip tightened, and his smile broadened. "Cross your heart, it's right?"

"Yep, cross my heart, an' spit on my thumb," grinned Billy.

Keeler's roaring laugh might have been heard half a mile away. "Well, along you go," he shouted, lifting Billy bodily over the gate. "You'll find Ma deefier than usual on account of a cold in the head, so talk real close and loud to her."

Billy found Mrs. Keeler peeling onions in the cook-house and after some trouble made her understand what was wanted. While she was shedding her apron and hunting for her hat he went outside. Maurice's school-books and slate lay on the bench beneath the hop vine. Billy grinned as his eyes fell on them. He climbed to the top of the gate-post and searched the surrounding fields for his chum, locating him finally down near the ditch, a lonely and pathetic figure seated on a little knoll, methodically topping mangles with a sickle. His back was toward Billy and it took all the latter's self restraint to refrain from giving the rally call, but he remembered what he had promised Maurice's father. So he slid down from the post and picking up the slate, produced a stub of slate-pencil from a pocket and wrote a message in symbols. Then on the other side of the slate he duplicated the message, adding

the necessary key to the code. This was the message that Billy wrote:



When Mrs. Keeler came out, laden with bake-pans and other kitchen utensils, Billy led her carefully across the stubble by a new route, nor did she dream his motive in so doing was to keep the house between them and the lonesome mangle-topper in the valley.

CHAPTER XXIII

MR. HINTER PROVES A PUZZLE

October's second morning dawned sullen and grey, with a chill wind banking slate-hued clouds in the sky. Deacon Ringold, taking the short cut across the stubble-fields to Wilson's, shivered as he glanced back at the black lines his feet had cut through the crisp white frost, and decided to put on his woolen underclothes right away. The deacon had important and disturbing news to convey to his neighbor and had started out early to seek his counsel.

As he climbed the rail fence his eyes swept the Settlement below, resting at length on the jail-like wall in the edge of the Scroggie timber, above which the tall derrick protruded like a white, scarred face. "Humph!" he mused, "Scroggie and Hinter must either have struck water, or give up. Their rig's quiet after chuggin' away day and night for weeks."

He glanced in the opposite direction to the blue smoke rising above the Wilson cedars. Then, as he prepared to climb down, he apparently changed his mind, for instead of taking the path to Tom Wilson's he walked briskly down toward the walled in derrick. Reaching it he paused and an exclamation of surprise escaped him. On the door of the wall an iron padlock had been fastened. There was no sign of human life about the place but within the walls could be heard the fierce growling of dogs. Ringold backed away and eyed the tall derrick. There was mystery here and he didn't relish mysteries. And there was a

pungent, salty smell about the place—the smell that oily machinery gives off when put under intense heat.

The deacon was curious to learn what caused that smell. He approached a little closer to the walls and scrutinized the ground carefully. It was stained with black patches of something and he saw that the planks of the wall and the portion of the derrick showing above it also were stained a greenish-black. He ran a finger over a greasy splash and sniffed. Then he backed away slowly, now nodding his head. He knew what had happened, just as well as though he had seen it. The careless drillers had exploded a barrel of coal-oil, and perhaps wrecked the drill. Yes, nothing surer. That had been the explosion which shook the windows of his home and awoke him several nights ago. Keeler and Wilson had heard it too. Well, it was too bad after all the trouble and expense Scroggie had gone to to find water for the Settlement.

So the deacon went thoughtfully on his way to Wilson's. He found Tom Wilson breakfasting alone. To the deacon's look of surprise his neighbor vouchsafed the information that a glad and glorious band of young people had been "cuttin' up" nearly all night there, and the boys and Ma were sleepin' in, like.

Ringold hung his hat on the stovepoker and got down to business at once. "Say, Tom, I've had an offer for my back hundred. Don' know whether to sell or not. Thought I'd like to hear what you'd advise."

Wilson drained his cup and set it down in the saucer, methodically. The news did not seem to surprise him. "Who made the offer, Hinter?" he asked.

The deacon started. "Yes, did he tell you about it?"

"No," Wilson pushed back his chair and felt for his pipe, "but he seems to want to own the whole Settlement.

He made me an offer for my place and he tried to buy Cobin Keeler's farm, too, so Cobin says."

"When, Tom, when?" asked Ringold, eagerly.

"Last night. At least that's when he made me my offer an' he must have gone across to Cobin's after he left me. Cobin jest left here not ten minutes ago. He come over to tell me all about it."

The deacon sat silent, thinking. "What's their game, Tom?" he asked suddenly.

"His game you mean."

"No, I don't either, I mean his and Scroggie's game; of course Scroggie's behind him."

"Yes," agreed Wilson, "I guess maybe he is. But, Deacon, I don't know what their game is; wish I did."

"Did you talk sell, Tom?" asked Ringold, anxiously.

"No sir," his neighbor answered promptly, "I should say not."

"And Cobin—he ain't any head at all, poor Cobin—did he talk sell?"

Wilson laughed. "Not Cobin. He's quite satisfied with his little farm, I guess. No, Hinter didn't get much satisfaction from either of us."

The deacon jumped up and reached for his hat. "Tom, I'm goin' to saddle your roan and go ask a few questions of the other farmers, if you don't mind."

"Good idea," agreed his neighbor. "Here, you best set down and have a cup of coffee and I'll saddle him, myself."

"No coffee, thanks; had breakfast; I'll go 'long with you. Oh, by the way, Tom, I know now what caused that explosion t'other night," and the deacon proceeded to relate his investigation of the walled-in well.

Wilson listened interestedly, until Ringold was through.

“ Well, they’ve been careful enough about hidin’ their good work, at any rate,” he said. “ You’d think they had somethin’ mighty precious inside them walls the way they’ve guarded it; but I’m sorry if they’ve met with an accident,” he added. “ Hinter did really seem anxious to get water.”

They went out to the stable and Wilson saddled the roan. “ I’ll be back in an hour or so,” called the deacon as he rode away.

He was as good as his word. Wilson was just finishing the morning’s milking, when the deacon returned. “ No other offers, Tom,” he said. “ Looks as though they were after this particular strip of territory. Anyhow it’s agreed that none of us will sell or rent without consultin’ the others, so I guess we can wait on Hinter’s game all right.”

“ Didn’t see Scraff, did you? ” asked Wilson.

“ No, I didn’t. Joe had left for Bridgetown to bring in a couple of duck-hunters to old man Swanson’s. Clevelanders, they are, so I didn’t see him.”

“ I’m afraid Joe’ll sell, if he gets a good offer,” reflected Wilson.

“ No, he’ll stick with the rest of us,” cried Ringold, emphatically, “ and I’ll tell you why. It’s just like his contrariness to do the very thing the others won’t do, but let me tell you somethin’. The very minute he makes a move I put the screws on him tight. Let him so much as whisper ‘ sell ’ an’ he’ll pay me every cent he owes me, with interest. No, Tom, we needn’t feel scarey about Joe Scraff.”

“ Well,” laughed Wilson, “ if anybody kin make Joe toe the scratch it’s you, Deacon. Didn’t see anythin’ of Hinter on your rounds, did you? ”

"No, but I met Scroggie. That feller improves on acquaintance, Tom, he does so! He ain't half bad after you get to know him. He seems to want to be neighborly, and while I think he's backing Hinter in some way I've an idea he's watching him pretty close."

"Say anythin' to him about Hinter's offer to buy?"

"Nary a word but I asked him what he intended to do with the Scroggie hardwoods. He told me that he had sold it to a lumber company. He says there'll be a big camp of cutters and sawyers down here this winter. I said I supposed he'd be goin' back to the States jest as soon as he got things cleared up here, an' you ought to see the queer look he gave me."

"'I'm not sure that I'll go back to the States,' he said, 'it all depends; besides,' says he, 'my boy and girl like this place and the people and I reckon I've got enough money to live wherever I like.'"

"Well, I'll put the roan in the stable, Tom; then I'll mosey 'cross home and get my men at the cider-makin'. A few frosts like last night's, an' all the apples will be soured. See you tonight at prayer-meetin'."

Wilson picked up his pails and carried them to the fence. Seeing Billy emerge from the house he placed them on the top step of the stile and waited.

"Have a good time last night?" he asked.

Billy grinned, "You bet! I tell you Ma kin certainly roast partridge fine, an' say, can't old Harry play the dandiest tune you ever heard? Lou says he puts all the songs of the wood-birds into one sweet warble."

"I guess whatever Lou says is jest about right, eh?"

Billy blushed to the roots of his hair but his grey eyes met his father's steadily. "Yep," he answered, "Jest about right."

Billy lifted the pails and turned up the path.

"Where have you put that man-eatin' swamp coon?" asked his father as he followed. "I believe he's gettin' cross. You'll have to watch him."

"Oh, Ringdo ain't cross," laughed Billy, "he's only playful. He's over to Teacher Stanhope's. He's so fond of the teacher he won't stay away from him."

Billy set the pails down on the block outside the milk-house and rubbed his cheek against Croaker, who had just alighted on his shoulder. "Are you goin' to show me where you found the gold-pieces, Croaker?" he asked, stroking the ruffled plumage smooth.

Croaker shooked his head and hopped to the ground. He had grown tired of having Billy put that question to him. With many throaty and indignant mutterings he pigeontoed across the yard, not even deigning to glance back at the laughing man and boy.

"Pa," said Billy, "would you mind comin' to the woodshed an' lookin' over my open water decoys. I've been restringin' 'em, an' weightin' the canvasbacks an' redheads, an' givin' the bluebills a fresh coat o' paint. I'd like to know what you think of my job."

"I heard you and Frank Stanhope arrangin' to go after bay ducks t'other day," said Wilson as he followed Billy into the shed.

"Yep, we're goin' tomorrow if this weather holds. I'll go over this afternoon to fix up a hide on Mud point."

"You seem to have managed the stringin' all right," said the father, examining the wooden ducks on the work bench. "A little too much white on the bluebills, I'd say."

"That's jest what I thought," said Billy. "I'll darken it some."

Wilson leaned against the bench and waited. He knew

that Billy had brought him into the shed to speak of other things than decoys.

"Pa," said the boy, in guarded tones, "you best watch that man Hinter, an' watch him close."

"Why?" said Wilson.

"Cause he's up to some game, an' I know it."

"But what makes you suspicious of Hinter?" asked his father gravely. "Hasn't he always minded his own business and been a law-abidin', quiet livin' man?"

"Yep," Billy admitted, slowly, "that's it. He's all right in lots of ways, but in other ways——"

He paused. "See here, Pa," he cried, "I happen to know one or two things about Hinter that I don't like. He's the boss of at least two bad men, an' I guess maybe there's more in the gang, too."

"And who are these two men? What have they done?"

"They're the two who've been workin' his drillin' rig; an' they're the men that robbed the Twin Oaks store."

"How do you know this?" Wilson asked sharply.

"I know it 'cause Maurice an' me saw 'em on the very night the store was robbed, out in Scroggie's woods. They had a lantern. We heard 'em speak about hidin' somethin' in the ha'nted house."

"And that's where Harry found the stolen stuff," mused Wilson. "What else, Billy?"

"It was them two who brought Hinter's drillin'-rig 'cross the lake in a schooner. I saw 'em the day they teamed it in. I knowed 'em both an' Pa, I overheard 'em talkin' 'bout hidin' the stolen stuff in the ha'nted house."

"Have you told anybody else about this besides me, Billy?"

"No," answered Billy, promptly, "not even Teacher Stanhope."

Wilson looked relieved. "I can't make head er tail of it," he said, frowning. "I can't think that Hinter is behind the men in any deviltry."

"His name ain't Hinter," said Billy. "It's Jacobs."
"What?"

"It's Jacobs. Listen, Pa, I'll tell you how I know. Anse, you remember, was sort of helper with them drillers till he got askin' too many questions an' they fired him. Well, all he asked 'em, *I put him up to ask*. Anse was always a mighty good listener an' he often heard these two, Jack and Tom, speak of Jacobs an' call him boss. An' one day when Hinter comes over, Anse heard one of 'em call him Jacobs, an' Hinter was awful mad about it."

"Well!" was all Wilson could say, and he repeated it to himself several times, dazedly.

Billy was watching him closely. "Pa," he said earnestly, "there's something else I might as well let you know while I'm about it. This man Hinter owns a schooner, er leastways is boss of one, an' it was her brought them drillin' rigs 'cross the lake. The boat's been layin' along the Point, a mile out from shore fer more'n a month now, an' Hinter has been keepin' in touch with her right along."

"But how do you know this?" asked Wilson in amazement. Billy hesitated before answering. "I know it," he said, "'cause every night that he rides to the lighthouse Maurice an' me sail up there an' sort o' hide up till he leaves."

"But why, Billy?"

"'Cause he—he wants Erie," said the boy, miserably, "an she won't marry him. We've wondered why he's been holdin' the schooner close in. So we been watchin'

Hinter. An' one night we follered him down the bar to the pines, an' we seen him signal the schooner. He built a little fire on the shore.

"After a little we saw a light 'way out on the lake. It stayed where it was an by an' by we heard oars. A boat landed an' a man Hinter called Cap'n, came across to where he sat by the fire."

"And did you hear anythin' of what passed between 'em, Billy?"

"Yep, we heard Hinter say Scroggie was a headstrong fool, an' he wished he'd never had anythin' to do with him; but that he'd have to handle him with gloves till he got Lost Man's Swamp away from him."

Wilson whistled. "What in the world does he want with that swamp, I wonder?" he cried.

He stood considering. "We'll just keep what we know to ourselves till we're quite sure," he said at length. "What d'ye say?"

Billy nodded. "That's what Trigger Finger 'ud do," he said, "an' Trigger Finger, he was always right, Pa."

CHAPTER XXIV

BILLY TO THE RESCUE

Nature had crooked a wooded arm about Rond Eau Bay so that her tranquillity seldom was disturbed by the fall gales which piled the waters of Lake Erie high and made her a veritable death-trap for late-sailing ships. To the thunder of heavy waves upon the pine-clad beach the little bay slept sweetly, while half a league beyond the bar a tempest-torn, dismasted schooner might be battered to pieces, or a heavy freighter, her back broken by the twisting seas, might sink to final rest. But there were times when Rond Eau awoke from her dreaming to gnash her white teeth and throw her hissing challenge to man to dare ride her banked-up seas in open boat. At such times only the foolish or venturesome listened. When the gale swept in from the East it transformed the upper waters into a seething cauldron, while, plunging in the nine-mile sweep from the West, it swept water at the foot, frothing and turbulent, across the rushlands.

At such times expert indeed must be the hand that guides the frail skiff through those treacherous seas. But the slim punt which rounded Mud Point betwixt the darkness and the dawn, in the teeth of an all night gale, was propelled by one who knew every whimsical mood of Rond Eau. Now high on frothy comber, now lost to view between the waves, the little craft beat onward, a speck of driftwood on the angry waves. Sullen daylight was revealing a world of wind-whipped, spray-drenched desolation when the punt at last rounded the

point and swept into the comparative calm of the lee shore. Then the rower shipped his oars and glanced at his companion who sat huddled low in the bow of the boat, the collar of his shooting coat turned high about his ears.

"Phew! teacher, some pull, that! Must a' been half an hour beatin' up from Levee."

"It seemed longer than that to me, Billy," laughed Stanhope. "Once or twice I thought we were goners, but you pulled the old girl through nobly."

"I don't know as I ever put her through a rougher sea," said Billy as he began placing the decoys. "We'll get set, then we'll push into the rushes, hide our boat, an' settle down comfortable in our blind. You'll find it warm, an' snug, an' wind-proof as a rat house, soon's I get a fire started in the little stove. Hello!" as a brown shaggy head poked itself from beneath the seat and a cold nose touched his wrist, "did you think I didn't know you was there, Moll?"

Moll whined and wagged her stub of a tail, undoubtedly sensing from her master's words and manner that her offense, in "sneakin' in," had been pardoned. Five minutes later they were seated snugly inside four walls of tightly woven rushes, the blind man's face alive and glowing with the joy of once more feeling the moist kiss of open water, his ears atuned for the first whistle of incoming wings. Billy crouched by his side, gun in hand, eyes sweeping the lighting bay.

Suddenly the spaniel's tail commenced beating a soft tattoo on the rush floor and Billy's grip tightened on the walnut stock.

"How many?" whispered Stanhope.

"Five, bluebill. Comin' right to us."

A moment later the "swowee" of the cutting wings sounded, close in, and the old gun spoke twice.

"Two down," cried Stanhope. "Good work, Billy!"

Billy took his eyes from the pair of dead ducks, floating shoreward and turned wonderingly to his companion.

"Teacher," he said in awed tones, "sometimes I'm sure you kin see. If you can't see how do you find out things like you do? How did you know I killed jest two ducks?"

"Listened for the splash," Stanhope answered. "Are you loaded, Billy? There's another flock coming."

"All ready but cappin'. Now, where's the flock?"

"Coming up from behind, so Moll says."

"Gosh!" whispered Billy. "I should say so; they're right onto us," and almost with the words the old gun roared again and again.

"Good!" exulted Stanhope. "Three down, Billy!"

"Yep, but one dived an' is gettin' away. After him, Moll." The spaniel, with a joyful whine, cleared the rush wall and splashed into the water. "Fine!" cried Billy, as he reloaded, "Moll's goin' to bring him in."

"Wounded whistlers aren't as hard to retrieve as red-head or bluebill," said Stanhope.

"How did you know they was whistlers?" cried Billy.

"By the sound of their wings, of course," laughed the man. "There," as a small duck flashed past the blind, "that's a green-winged teal, and he's flying at the rate of about ninety miles an hour."

Eastward the leaden clouds opened to let an arrow of orange light pierce the damp mists of dawn; then the fissure closed again and tardy daylight disclosed only a dun-colored waste of cowering rushes and tossing water. Far out in the bay a great flock of ducks arose, the beat of their wings growing up above the boom of the wind,

stood black against the lowering skies an instant, then swept like a gigantic shadow close down above the curling water. Here and there detached fragments of the flock grew up and drifted shoreward. A flock of widgeon, gleaming snow-white against the clouds as they swerved in toward the decoys, were joined by a pair of kingly canvasbacks. Swiftly they approached, twisted aside just out of range, and then turned and came in with wings set against the wind.

Stanhope heard the splash of their bodies, as they lit among the decoys. He wondered why Billy did not shoot. A tense moment passed and still the old gun gave no voice. Moll was whining low and eagerly. Then, suddenly, there arose the sound of webbed feet slapping water, strong wings lifted to the wind, and Stanhope knew that the ducks had gone.

"Billy!" he cried, "why didn't you shoot?"

"I guess I didn't think about it," said the boy. "There's a boat out yonder, an' she's havin' trouble. I was watchin' her."

"A boat in trouble? Where is she?"

"Out in the middle of the bay. There's two men in her; she must be shippin' water, 'cause she's low down. She's one of Swanson's boats. He ought 'a know better than let a couple of greenies out on that sea."

Billy had thrown off his shooting-coat and was climbing out of the blind.

"What are you going to do?" asked Stanhope.

"Goin' out to give a hand," shouted Billy. "No teacher, you best stay right here; you can't help me any an' I may have to bring them two shooters ashore in the punt."

His last words were drowned in the wind. Already he

was dragging the punt from the reeds. A moment later Stanhope heard the dip of his oars as he rounded the point and put the tiny craft into the seas and his cheerful hail, "I'll be back soon, teacher."

With broadening day the gale had strengthened. Stanhope felt a few stinging snow-pellets on his face, as he gazed, unseeing, outward and waited with tense nerves for the hail of his young friend. Half an hour passed—it seemed like hours to the man waiting, hoping, fearing—and still Billy did not come. He replenished the fire and, his hand coming in contact with the coat which Billy had discarded, he held it on his knees, close to the little stove. Slowly the minutes dragged past and a cold dread of what might have happened grew in the blind man's heart. Billy had likely reached the boat only in time to see it founder and in striving to save its exhausted occupants——.

Unable to endure the thought Stanhope sprang to his feet and lifting his arms high shouted with all his strength, "Billy, Billy boy!"

"Ho, teacher!" came an answering voice. "We're comin' straight in with the wind. I've got 'em both."

Stanhope sank back on his box, his relaxed nerves throbbing and his lips forming the words: "Thank God!"

A few minutes later Billy tumbled into the blind. "Quick," he cried, as he drew on his coat. "They're nigh done fer. We've gotta keep 'em movin'. Good! I see you've heated the tea; I'll jest take it along. We'll leave gun an' decoys right here with Moll to watch 'em, 'cause we're likely to have our hands full. Are you ready, teacher?"

"All set," cried Stanhope. "Leave your belt loose so I can hang to it and I'm with you. That's right. Who were they, Billy?"

"Couple of shooters from Cleveland. One of 'em's a big, strong feller, an' he ain't as near done up as the other. I started 'em to shore along the rush-track. They'll be all hunky so long as they keep goin'. We best get 'em to the nearest house."

"Well, that's my place," answered Stanhope. "How am I navigating, Billy?"

"Fine; keepin' up as well as though you saw right where you're goin'. They're only a little ahead now."

As the wooded shore was reached they came up with the rescued men. Billy passed the chilled and wretched two the hot tea and after they had drunk he and Stanhope took the lead through the stumpy fields.

Half an hour later, seated about the roaring fire in Stanhope's cottage, huge cups of hot coffee on their knees, the venturesome strangers seemed none the worse for their trying experience. The larger of the two, a powerfully-built man with pleasant clean shaven face and keen blue eyes, turned now to Stanhope.

"Where did the boy go?" he asked. "He must have been wet to the skin."

"He went back to take up the decoys and bring in the boats," answered Stanhope. "Oh, Billy's used to roughing it. He'll be back directly."

"By George!" cried the big man, slapping his friend's knee. "There's a boy for you, Doctor. Why, sir," addressing Stanhope, "not one youngster in a thousand could have done what he did. When he came to us our boat was all but swamped. We had given up. My friend here was utterly helpless with the cold and I was little better. And then he came riding close in like a mere straw on the waves and something flashed past me and fell with a bump against our boat-seat. 'Bale,' he screeched, and I picked

up the can he had thrown us and bale I did for all I was worth. Then he came shooting back. 'You got to get out of that trough,' he shouted. 'Throw your painter loose, so's I can grab it as I pass, and I'll straighten your bow to take the seas.' "

The speaker paused, his face aglow. "I managed to cast that painter loose and the boy caught it as he shot past us. Then I felt the skiff straighten and I heard him shout again, 'Bale! bale like fury!' So I baled and baled and by and by we shipped less water than I managed to throw out. All this time that youngster was hauling us in to safety. I don't know who the boy is, but let me tell you this, my friend, if I was his daddy I'd be the proudest man on the face of the earth."

His companion, a slight, stooped man, the sallowness of whose face was accentuated by a short black moustache, who had remained almost silent from the time he had entered the house, looked up at these words and smiled. "We owe that boy and this gentleman our lives," he said briefly.

The big man laid a hand on Stanhope's arm. "My good friend," he said, "will you allow me to introduce you to the grateful chaps you have helped save. This gentleman with me is the famous specialist, Doctor Cavinalt of Cleveland; and yours truly is plain Bill Maddoc of the same city, lawyer by profession."

"My friend has forgotten to mention that he is state's attorney and a noted bugbear to all evil-doers," smiled the doctor. "In other words he's known as Trail Down Maddoc and — if he will permit of my so stating — is far more famous in his own particular line than am I in mine."

"Tut, tut," cried Maddoc, "what matter such trifles as these at this time? And now," turning to their host, "if you will honor us? "

“ My name is Stanhope; Frank Stanhope.”

“ What? ” The lawyer was on his feet and had his hands on Frank’s shoulders.

“ You say Stanhope? Why, man alive! I’ve been looking high and low for you. What do you think of that, Doctor, I’ve found him at last! ”

“ Young man,” said Maddoc, turning again to Frank, “ will you please answer a few questions? Did you ever know a queer old man by the name of Scroggie? ”

“ Why, yes,” Frank answered, somewhat puzzled. “ He lived next farm to me.”

“ And,” Maddoc resumed, “ do you happen to know that he made a will, leaving all he possessed to you? ”

“ Yes, sir, so he said; but the will was never found.”

“ And for a very good reason, by George,” cried Maddoc. “ How could it be found when it lay safely locked in a deposit box in my vault? ”

“ I’m afraid I don’t quite understand — ” commenced the amazed Stanhope.

“ Of course not, how could you? ” cried the lawyer.

“ But there now, I’ll explain.

“ One morning something over a year ago a queer little man came to my office. He told me his name, Scroggie, but refused to give me any address. He said he wished to make his will and insisted that I draw it up. It was a simple will, as I remember it, merely stating that ‘ I something-or-other, Scroggie, hereby bequeath all my belongings, including land and money, to Frank Stanhope.’ I made it out exactly as he worded it, had it sealed and witnessed and handed it to him. But the old fellow refused to take it. I asked him why, and he said: ‘ You keep it safe until I send for it. I’m willin’ to pay for your trouble.’

“ ‘ But listen, old man,’ I said, ‘ supposing you should die suddenly. Life is very uncertain, you know. This will should be left where it can be easily found, don’t you see? ’

“ ‘ That’s just where I don’t want it left,’ he says. ‘ I want it kept safe. I’ll take a chance on dying suddenly.’ And by George! the old fellow got up and shambled out, leaving a twenty-dollar gold piece on the table.”

“ Then,” said Frank, moistening his dry lips, “ you have the will, Mr. Maddoc? ”

“ I have! ” cried the delighted lawyer, “ and whether he left you much or little nobody can dispute your claim. Young man, shake hands again! ”

But Stanhope had sunk on a chair, his face in his hands. Doctor Cavinalt went softly over and stood beside him. “ My friend,” he said gently, “ good news often bowls us over, but perhaps there’s even better news in store for you. Fortune is a good thing, but with fortune and your eye-sight restored —— ”

Frank lifted a wan face. “ You mean —— ? ” his dry lips formed the words.

The slender sensitive fingers of the specialist lifted the lids of the unseeing eyes. Intently he examined them, then with a quick smile that transformed his grave face to almost boyish gladness, he spoke.

“ It is as I thought, Mr. Stanhope. Your sight is quite unimpaired and can be restored to you by a simple operation. Your blindness was caused either from a blow or a fall, was it not? ”

Frank nodded. “ A beam struck me,” he whispered, “ I thought — I thought — ”

“ Tomorrow,” said the doctor, retiring once more into his professional shell, “ I shall remove the pressure that obstructs your vision. The operation, which will be most

simple, can be performed here. We have but to remove all pressure on the nerve centres that refuse their function now — and you will see.”

He motioned to his friend, and the two went over to the window and talked together in low tones.

Stanhope, hands clasped together, sat staring into a vista of shadows that were all but dissolved. Above them lifted a face that smiled — and down across sleeping, darkening waters a long ray of light swept to touch his unseeing eyes and whisper her message of hope.

* * * * *

It was nearly noon when Billy, bending beneath a load of wild ducks, came up the path to the cottage. Stanhope, reading his step, groped his way out to meet him. “Ho, Billy Boy,” he cried, holding out his hands.

Billy placed his wet, cold ones in Stanhope’s. “I simply had to stay an’ shoot,” he explained. “The ducks were fair poundin’ into the decoys. How are the Cleveland fellers?”

“Good as ever, Billy, dried out — and gone. Come into the house. I’ve got great news.”

Billy turned puzzled eyes on his friend, reading a wonderful happiness in the glowing face. He dropped his ducks and followed Stanhope inside. The table was set for dinner and Billy sniffed hungrily.

“Now teacher,” he said, dropping into a seat by the fire, “give us the news.”

But Stanhope shook his head. “Not yet, Billy. Wait until you’ve eaten. You’re hungry — as all hunters are bound to be. There now,” as his housekeeper brought in the meat and potatoes, “sit down and eat — and eat fast, because I can’t keep my good news back much longer.”

Billy sat down at the table and without a word fell to.

Stanhope stood beside the window, humming a tune, a smile on his face. He roused himself from his musing, as Billy scraped back his chair. "Full up?" he asked.

"Full up, teacher. Now let's have the good news."

Stanhope told him, his voice not always steady, and Billy sat silent, his grey eyes growing bigger and bigger. And at the conclusion he did a very boyish thing. He lowered his head to the table and cried.

Stanhope groped his way to him, placed his hands gently on the heaving shoulders, and there they remained until Billy, with a long sigh, raised his swimming eyes.

"Teacher," he said. "*She's* gotta be told about this. You know how *she* always hoped ——"

"Yes."

Billy stood up and reached for his cap. "If Anse comes over, you kin tell him where I've gone. I'll be back long afore dark."

"But, Billy, the wind! You'd better not go."

"The wind's gone down," said the boy. "Jest a fair sailin' breeze now."

"She'll come, you think?"

"She'll come," said Billy, and went out, closing the door softly behind him.

CHAPTER XXV

MR. HINTER MAKES A CONFESSION

It was the evening of the next day. Frank Stanhope lay on a couch in a darkened room, a black bandage across his eyes. Erie Landon sat beside him, holding his hand. The pungent odor of ether hung in the air. Out in the dining room old Doctor Allworth, from Bridgetown, was discussing with the specialist things known only to those men of science.

Erie was very happy — happier than she had ever expected to be again. Doctor Cavinalt had pronounced the operation a success; in a week or ten days the bandage might be taken off. God's world of light and beauty was to be his again — and hers!

Stanhope felt the unconscious tightening of her fingers and spoke her name ever so softly. She gave a little, contented sigh, and nestled her cool cheek against his own.

"I was dreaming of the foot of the Causeway," he whispered, "and the light."

"And it reached straight across through the blackness to you?" she asked.

"Straight to me, dear; and at the farther end of its misty radiance I saw you standing. You stretched your dear arms out to me and along the shimmering track, drawn by your great and tender woman's love, I sped to you."

"And found me, Frank?"

"Found you," he echoed joyfully. "Found you as I have prayed through lightless days I might, some day, find you, blue-eyed girl with heart of gold; found you with your

hope, your loyalty, your tenderness and your forgiveness."

"And now," she whispered, "there lie the days of sunshine and happiness ahead of us, Frank; and oh, how we will enjoy them, you and I and Billy."

"Yes, we mustn't forget Billy, God bless him."

In the outer room the learned discussion was terminated suddenly by a loud exclamation from the old doctor.

"God love us, it's a crow!" he cried, "and the rascal has appropriated my glasses! Laid 'em on my chair-arm for an instant and the cheeky beggar swooped in through the open window and picked 'em up."

"That's Croaker," laughed Erie. "Billy won't be far behind him. I had better go out and explain things, Frank."

She touched her warm lips to his and went into the adjoining room to find Croaker perched on a curtain-pole, animatedly congratulating himself on the new and wonderful shiny thing he had been so fortunate as to discover.

"Croaker," Erie called. At the sound of her voice the crow stopped trying to tear the nosepiece from the lens and cocked his head side-wise.

"Kowakk," he gurgled, which meant "I thought I knew you, Miss, but I guess I don't."

"Croaker, good old Croaker, come down and I'll get you a cookie," Erie begged.

Croaker considered this last statement a moment. Then he carefully raised one foot and twisted half way around on the bar.

"A cookie, a nice fat cookie, with a raisin in its centre," coaxed the girl.

The crow lifted the other foot and with much fluttering and complaining managed to get all the way around.

Mrs. Burke had brought in a plate of cookies. Erie took one and held it up, as an enticement to Croaker.

"Want it?" she asked. "Then come down and be a good crow."

Then it was that Croaker, gripping the glasses in one black claw, burst into a cry of joyful recognition.

Just at this juncture the shed door was nosed softly open and a striped, furry animal rolled into the room like a ball and, raising himself on his hind legs, took the cookie from Erie's hand.

"Ringdo, you old sweetheart!" cried the girl and, reaching for the big swamp-coon, gathered him into her arms.

Doctor Allworth, after one startled look at the ferocious-looking newcomer, had climbed upon the table and now gazed wildly at the strange sight of a golden haired girl holding to her bosom a wild animal which might be anything from a wolf to a grizzly, for aught he knew.

At the sound of the girl's voice the swamp coon had dropped the cookie, and as she swept him into her arms his slender red tongue darted forth to give the curling tress above her ear an affectionate caress. Ringdo recognized in Erie the playmate who used to romp with him and stray with him along spongy moss and clayey ditches.

At this particular moment Croaker, from whom attention had for the time being been diverted, came into evidence again. At first sight of his old enemy the crow had grown rigid with anger; his black neck-ruff had stood up like the feathers on an Indian warrior's head dress and into his beady eyes had sprung the fighting-fire. When Ringdo got possession of the cookie he raised his short wings and prepared to swoop, strike, and if luck held, swoop again. But when the coon dropped the cookie that

he might show the girl who had come back to the old playground that he was glad Croaker promptly changed his mind. He swooped, but on the precious cookie instead of on Ringdo, and with the prize in his black beak and the glasses dangling from one black claw, he went out of the open window like a dark streak.

The old doctor sighed dolefully. "Well, my glasses are gone," he murmured. "And how I will ever do without 'em, I don't know." Then, becoming suddenly aware of his ridiculous position, he stepped ponderously down from the table to his chair.

Hiding her laughing face in Ringdo's long fur, Erie reassured him. "Please, Doctor Allworth, don't be frightened of this old coon," she said. "Indeed, he is quite harmless."

"Perhaps so," returned the old gentleman dryly, "but, you see, I happen to have heard an opinion of friend Ringdo's gentle nature from a certain learned pedagogue, whose wounds I dressed recently. So, my dear young lady, if you will be good enough to keep tight hold of him for a moment, I'll follow my renowned friend into the parlor and learn how Frank is coming along." And suiting the action to the words he edged slowly around the table and, backing into the parlor, closed the door.

"Ringdo," cried Erie, slapping the coon's fat sides, "you can't possibly see your friend, Frank, now so come along. We'll have a race down the path and a scramble among the leaves."

She caught her hat from a peg, opened the door, and Ringdo gamboled out before her. Down the path to the gate they sped and out into the tree-hedged road. Already the frost-pinchd leaves, crimson-veined and golden, were being swung to earth by a soft wind that promised snow.

With Ringdo galloping clumsily beside her Erie went down the road, trilling a snatch of a song.

She did not realize what a perfect picture she presented, with her golden hair wind-strewn, her red lips parted, and the old joy singing in her heart and kindling a light in her eyes. But the boy who met her at the curve in the road realized it, and his face grew wistful as he asked: "Is he all right, Erie?"

"He is all right, Billy," she answered softly.

Billy's grey eyes grew big with realization and a long sigh escaped his lips. He bent above the coon, who had sprawled in the dust, all four feet in the air, inviting a tussle. The girl saw something glitter and splash on the dark fur and her throat tightened. "Oh Billy, Billy," she choked, and with all the abandon of her nature stooped and gathered boy and animal close to her.

A little later they went back up the road, side by side. Ringdo having heard the call of the forest-creek had strayed into the tangle, perhaps hoping to find a fat frog which had not yet sought its winter sleeping-bog. They paused to watch a red squirrel flash along the zig-zag fence and halt, with twitching tail, as the chatter of the black he was pursuing came down to him from swaying hickory tree-top. High overhead a flock of crows passed silently, black hurtling bodies seeming to brush the grey, low hanging skies as they melted into distance. High above, the shrill whistle of wings told of wild ducks seeking the marshes and the celery beds of the bay.

"Erie," spoke the boy as they turned to resume their way, "Ma told me to tell you that she'd be over ag'in tonight to stay with you. She's had an awful time keepin' teacher's friends from swarmin' over to see how he was gettin' along an' she says she simply had to promise that

they could come over after supper. I guess the whole Settlement is over to our place. I better lope along an' tell 'em the good news." He turned away as they reached the gate — then hesitated.

"Anything I can tell *him*, Billy?" asked Erie, noticing his reluctance.

"No, but there's somethin' I ought'a tell you, I guess," he answered. "I've jest come from old Swanson's boardin' house, at the foot. Mr. Maddoc an' the specialist doctor are goin' to leave there an' stay at teacher's, as you likely know?"

Erie nodded. "They told me all about it. How they are going to shoot from your Mud Point, and how good it was of you to let them," she smiled.

Billy grinned. "Say!" he murmured, "as if there was anythin' any of us wouldn't do fer them now. Well, Mr. Maddoc, who's havin' Joe Scraff drive down fer their stuff tonight, was comin' along up with me when we met Hinter, 'bout a mile back on the road."

He paused and searched the girl's face. "You see, Erie," he said slowly, "I'd been tellin' Mr. Maddoc all about how Hinter an' Scroggie had been tryin' to find water fer us, an' how they had had a barrel of oil explode, an' everythin'. Somehow he didn't seem a bit like a stranger. I didn't mind tellin' him at all. Why, I even told him about the Twin Oaks store robbery, an' about Hinter wantin' to get hold of Lost Man's Swamp, an' everythin'.

"He was awful interested, an' asked me to show him the fenced-in well. So we took 'cross the fields an' he saw it. He went all around the walls an' even climbed up one side of 'em, an' looked over. When he came down he said: 'Jest as I thought, Billy. That explosion you spoke of

was a charge of nitro glycerine.' We struck back fer the road an' I guess he was thinkin' hard, 'cause he didn't talk any more. Then, as we was climbin' the fence to the road he asks: 'What kind of a chap is this man, Hinter, Billy?'

" 'Why,' I says, 'there he is now.' Hinter had jest climbed the opposite fence an' stepped into the road. Mr. Maddoc slid down an' went right up to him. Hinter's face turned white when he saw Mr. Maddoc. He couldn't speak fer a minute, an' then all he did was mumble somethin'.

" 'Billy,' Mr. Maddoc says to me, 'would you go on a piece an' leave me alone with this man. You see we've met before an' I want 'a ask him some questions.'

" So I come on an' I guess Mr. Maddoc had a whole lot of questions to ask fer he ain't come yet."

Erie was standing against the gate, her arms stretched along its top, hands clenching its rough pickets.

" There, he's coming now, Billy," she whispered, as the lawyer's tall form swung about the curve in the road. " No, don't go yet; perhaps he will have something more to tell us."

But the lawyer, apparently, had nothing to tell them. Gravely he lifted his hat to Erie, threw a smile of good-fellowship to Billy and turned up the path to the cottage.

* * * * *

No sooner had Billy gone, leaving Maddoc alone with Hinter, than the lawyer's manner underwent a lightning change. His big face lost its jovial look and the bushy eyebrows contracted to sinister juts on his puckered brow, as the cold eyes beneath them probed the man before him.

" Well, Jacobs — or whatever your name happens to be now — what are you doing here? " he asked.

Hinter, with an effort, shook off his first cringing fear. "Supposing I tell you that it's none of your business, Mr. Maddoc," he said, with a poor attempt at bluff. "I am not under your jurisdiction here."

"Oh, is that so? Well, my smooth friend, you're liable to learn that my jurisdiction extends further than you think. Now see here, Jacobs. You know — and I know — that I have enough on you already to put you away where you'll do little harm for several years to come. Do you want me to do it?"

"No." The man's answer was nothing more than a spiritless murmur. Maddoc, he knew, had his record and had spoken truly when he said he had the goods on him. "No," he repeated with a shudder.

"Then come clean, Jacobs. Now then, what's your game?"

"I came here after you drove me from the Pennsylvania oil fields," said the other, realizing the uselessness of lying.

"Why?"

"To prospect; to look for a new field. I figured that the Pennsylvania vein would come out about here and extend northward."

"Sounds reasonable. And you still think so, eh?"

"Yes."

"Is that your well with the jail-wall about it, yonder?"

"No, I bored it but it belongs to Pennsylvania Scroggie, the man whom you helped defeat the Southern lease ring."

If Maddoc was surprised, he did not show it. "You struck oil, I see, Jacobs."

"Yes, about an eight-a-day well."

"Deep?"

"No, surface."

"And Scroggie — does he know your record?"

"Certainly not. Oh for God's sake stop probing me this way. I'm willing to tell all there is to tell."

"That suits me, Jacobs. Go on."

"As I say, I came here to prospect. I found plenty of surface evidence of oil and gas but without capital I was helpless. I learned that a thousand-acre tract of woods, rich in oil indications, was owned by Pennsylvania Scroggie. I knew that he was a hog and that if I showed my hand too clearly he would kick me under and go it alone. Through a friend who owned a lake schooner I made Scroggie a proposition. I guaranteed to show him a virgin oil territory and operate his rigs for a certain percentage of the output. This he agreed to. Then he came and when he found that the vein lay on his own land he was furious and tried to break the contract.

"I had anticipated his doing something like this and had provided against it. Old man Scroggie, the original owner of this land, had left a will, bequeathing all he owned to a young man of this district, Stanhope by name. Scroggie, I knew, was afraid of the will coming to light and I worked on this fear. It was known throughout this community that the one friend old Scroggie had trusted was Spencer, the store-keeper, who, having quarreled with the elder Stanhope over a survey of property, held a secret grudge against his son, Frank."

"And," said the lawyer as Jacobs paused to wipe his beaded brow, "you thought the will lay in Spencer's safe, and that he was holding it away because of petty malice?"

"Exactly."

"And knowing that in spite of his many short-comings Pennsylvania Scroggie wouldn't deliberately rob young Stanhope of the property, providing he knew for sure that

his uncle had made the young man his heir, you made up your mind to blow Spencer's safe and get hold of the will yourself—supposing it was there, and so make sure of your own little rake-off."

Jacobs gazed at the lawyer wonderingly. "How did you know?" he stammered.

"I know, Jacobs, that you and your henchmen, Tom Standish and Jack Blake, robbed Twin Oaks store and blew the safe; also that you were disappointed. There was no will there. Where you made your big mistake, my friend, was in misjudging Pennsylvania Scroggie. For instance, when you lied to him and told him that you had found the will, and threatened to turn it over to the rightful heir, providing he did not give you a clear deed to Lost Man's Swamp—what did he say to you?"

The question stung the other as a leather lash stings quivering flesh.

"What did he say to you?" repeated the lawyer, and the wretched man on the rack answered hopelessly: "He told me that if I didn't give the will up to Stanhope he would have me arrested and sent to the pen."

A little smile curled the corners of Maddoc's stern mouth. "Well, that's Pennsylvania Scroggie," he said, as though to himself. "Hard, bull-headed and a sharper in every legitimate sense but square as they make 'em. And you," he asked, pointedly, "what did you do?"

"Of course I had to own up that I had lied. He had me down on my knees all right, but I was valuable to him right then. We had started boring on his land. He said that he would give me another chance but that I would have to keep honest."

The man who had the reputation of being able to read criminals unerringly glanced keenly at the man's face.

"And you've found the condition too difficult; isn't that so?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Maddoc, as God is my witness, I was keeping honest and intended to go on." Jacobs had drawn his drooping form erect, and now spoke with a certain dignity.

Maddoc was silent for a moment. Then his square chin shot forward.

"Jacobs," he said, crisply, "I'll give you twenty-four hours in which to lose yourself. You can't stay here."

Something like a sigh escaped the man who listened to this edict. He took a lagging step or two forward.

"Wait," said the lawyer. "Tell me, Jacobs, is there anything in this world you care for outside of yourself and your ambition to climb to fortune over the necks of others? I'm curious to know."

"Yes," answered the other, without hesitation. "There is something; there are dogs and children."

"Dogs and children," repeated the lawyer. "Dogs and children." He stood looking away through the failing light to where a strip of mauve-lined sky peeked through the heavy tissue of cloud.

"And what do dogs and children think of you?" he asked, abruptly.

"Both trust me," said Jacobs simply and Maddoc knew that he spoke the truth. He strode across and put his hands on the shoulders of the man from whom he had wrung confession.

"Listen!" he said harshly. "You know me and you know I don't often give a man like you more than a second chance. You have had your second chance and failed. But see here, I'm not infallible. If dogs and children trust you there must be some good in you, and by George! I'm going to do something which is either going to prove

the biggest piece of damn foolishness or the biggest coup I have ever pulled off in my life. I'm going to take my grip from your throat, Jacobs, and leave you to the dogs and the children.

"Now, here's some news for you. The will has been found and Frank Stanhope is heir to the Scroggie forest-lands. But if there is oil here—and there is—both you and Pennsylvania Scroggie will be needed. I have no doubt but a satisfactory arrangement on a share producing plan can be made with the owner of the land. I'll see Pennsylvania Scroggie tonight and he'll do what I ask. I pulled him out of a rather tight hole and I guess he won't have forgotten. Come over to Stanhope's cottage in the morning. Now remember what the children and dogs expect of you, my friend; good-bye until tomorrow."

He smiled and held out his hand. The other man took it dazedly, then slowly and with head lifted towards the darkening skies, he passed down the road.

CHAPTER XXVI

A GOLDEN WEDDING GIFT

Bad news travels fast but good news wings its way quite as speedily. Life teaches the human heart to accept the one bravely and to laugh happily with the other, for after all life is just a ringing note that sounds through and above the eternal weaving of God's shuttle — at times clear, reaching to the highest stars; at other times a minor wail of pain. But the weaving goes on, drab threads mingling with the brighter ones; and so the heart learns to withstand, and better still to hope. It may be, when the shuttle runs slower and the fabric is all but woven, if the weaver is brave and strong he is able to decipher the riddle of it all. "If you would experience happiness, find it in the happiness of others."

Now the unrest and uncertainty which had overshadowed Scotia for months had been miraculously lifted and in its place was rest and certainty. Sorrow and pity for the man who had been stricken with blindness gave place to joy and congratulation. Swifter-winged than the harbinger of sorrow, which sometimes falters in its flight as though loath to cause a jarring note deep within God's harmony, flashed the joyful news that Frank Stanhope had come into his inheritance and would see again. For a week following the wonderful news the people of the Settlement did little else than discuss it together. Man, woman and child they came to the vine-covered cottage to tell Stanhope they were glad.

Pennsylvania Scroggie had been one of the first to offer

his congratulations. "Young man," he said to Stanhope, "I'm some rough on the outside but I reckon I'm all right inside. You've got your sight back and you've got, in this fine piece of land my old uncle left you, what promises to be a real oil field. Hinter and I are going to develop it for you, if you've no objections. And you've got a whole lot more than that," glancing at Erie, who stood near. And Stanhope, sensing the sterling worth of the man, shook hands gladly.

Lawyer Maddoc and Doctor Cavinalt had gone back to Cleveland, promising to return every fall so long as their welcome held out and Billy was there to guide them about and save their lives, if necessary.

Old Harry O'Dule's dream was about to be realized, Stanhope had assured him that he would see to it that he should play his whistle beneath Ireland's skies before another autumn dawned.

It was a world of silence, a world bathed in golden haze, that Stanhope gazed upon with the restoration of his sight. A long time his eyes dwelt upon the vista before him, with its naked trees piercing the mauve-line of morning mist shimmering above the yellow wood-smoke. The girl beside him knew from the tightening hand on hers and the awe that paled his quivering face that the silence spoke a thankfulness which mere words could never express. So she waited, and after a long time he turned slowly and holding her at arm's length, smiled down into her eyes.

"And you, too," he whispered. "With all this, I have you, too."

"You know that you have always had me, Frank," she said softly.

"But more than ever I want you now; more than ever

I need you. Erie," he said earnestly, "are you willing to marry me right away — next week?"

"Oh Frank —" she began, but he checked her utterance with his lips.

"The Reverend Reddick is available at any day, any hour, Lighthouse girl; he's conducting revival services in the Valley church. It will all be so simple. Won't you say next week?"

She gazed into his radiant face with serious eyes. "But Frank," she whispered, "it may be cold and dismal next week, I — I always thought that I should like our wedding to be —"

Her head went down to hide against his arm.

"Go on, Lighthouse girl. You always thought you would like our wedding to be — when?"

"On a golden, Indian summer day like this," she finished and closed her eyes as his arms went about her.

* * * * *

"And ut's married they were this mornin', whilst the dew still clung to the mosses, and ut's meself was witness to the j'inin' av two av the tinderrest hearts in all the wurruld." Old Harry O'Dule, on his rounds to spread the joyful tidings of Frank and Erie's marriage, had met Billy leading a fat bay horse along a sun-streaked forest path.

Billy stared at the old man; then his face broke into a grin. "O Gee!" he sighed, and sinking on a log, closed his eyes. "O Gee!" he repeated — leaping to his feet and throwing his arms about the neck of the bay and yelling into that animal's twitching ear. "Hear that, you Thomas? They're married, Erie an' Teacher Stanhope's married!"

"Billy, is ut clane crazy ye've gone?" chided the old

man, "that ye'd be afther deafenin' the poor steed wid yer yellin'! Listen now, fer ut's more I'll be tellin' ye."

Billy kicked his hat high in air and turned a hand-spring. "Tell me all about it, Harry. You saw 'em married, did you?"

"Faith and I did," cried Harry. "And play 'em a weddin' march on me whistle I did, soft as a spring rain and swate as the very joy they do be feelin' this day. A king he looked, Billy, and his bride a quane, ivery inch av her. But no more av your questions now," he broke off, "fer step along I must, singin' me thankfulness from me whistle, and spakin' the good tidings to them I mate along the way."

Billy watched the old man move down the path, the wild strains of the Irish tune he was playing falling on his ears long after the player had been swallowed up in the golden haze. Then he too passed on, bay Thomas walking sedately behind. As he rounded a bend he met Maurice Keeler and Jim Scroggie, heads close together and speaking animatedly.

"Ho, Bill!" cried Maurice. "Bringin' bay Thomas up to the stable fer winter, eh? Gee! Jim, look at that horse; did you ever see such a change in anythin' in your life?"

"Thomas has sure fattened up," grinned Jim. "I guess it would puzzle old Johnston to know our horse now, eh, Bill?"

"You mean *your* horse, Jim," corrected Billy.

"No I don't either; he's only a third mine. One third's yours and the other third's Maurice's."

Maurice and Billy stared at him. "It was your money paid fer him," Billy asserted.

"Well, what of it? Maurice found him a soft hidin'

place and good pasture on his Dad's farm, didn't he? "

" Sure, but then — "

" And it's you who's goin' to see that he gets cared for all winter, ain't it? "

" You bet it is," cried Billy.

" Well then, I claim he's a company horse an' you an' me an' Maurice is that company. Now, that's settled, let me tell you what Maurice and me was talkin' about when you met us."

Billy unsnapped the tie-strap from Thomas' halter so that he might crop the wayside grass without hindrance and sat down on a log opposite the one occupied by his friends.

Jim nudged Maurice but Maurice shook his head. " You tell him," he said.

" Bill," Jim cried eagerly. " I got a bit of news for you that'll make you want to stand on your head and kick splinters off the trees."

Billy grinned. " An' I got a piece of news fer you fellers, too," he returned. " But go on, your news first, Jim."

" Teacher Stanhope has made over a deed of Lost Man's Swamp to you, Bill," said Jim. " I heard Dad telling Mr. Hinter all about it. Dad was there when Lawyer Maddoe drew up the deed — Maurice, you crazy hyena, will you keep quiet? "

Maurice had rolled backward off the log, the while he emitted cries that would have done a scalp-hunting Indian credit. " Three cheers fer Bill! " he yelled. " He discovered Lost Man's Swamp oil field. Trigger Finger Tim ain't got nuthin' on our Bill."

Billy was standing up now, his perplexed face turned questioningly on his chums.

"That's right, Bill," cried Jim. "You really did discover it, you know. Hinter said he was the only one who knew the oil was there until you rafted out to the ponds and saw the oil-bubbles breakin' on 'em. He says that a fortune likely lies there, so you see —"

"An' Teacher Stanhope, he deeded the swamp to me," said Billy dazedly. He got up from the log and squared his shoulders. "Well," he spoke, "that was mighty good of him, but I ain't wantin' that swamp."

"But Bill," urged Jim, "the oil they've found there'll make you rich."

Billy shook his head. "I'm as rich as I ever want'a be right now, Jim."

"Look here, Bill," cried Maurice. "You don't want'a hurt Teacher Stanhope's feelin's, do you?"

Billy glanced at him quickly, a troubled look in his eyes. "N-no," he said, "you bet I don't."

"Then that's all there is to it; you keep Lost Man, that's what you do."

Billy considered. "I ain't sayin' jest what I'll do," he spoke finally. "I gotta ask another person's advice on this thing. But if I do take it you, Jim, an' you, Maurice, are goin' to be my partners in Lost Man same's you are in bay Thomas. Here, Maurice, you take Thomas to our stable an' give him a feed. I gotta go somewhere else." And leaving Jim and Maurice sitting, open-mouthed, Billy ducked into the timber.

Not until he had put some distance between himself and his friends did he remember that he had not told them the great and wonderful news that had been imparted to him by old Harry. Well, never mind, they would hear it soon. Harry would see to that. He turned into a path that strayed far up among clumps of red-gold maples and ochre-

stained oaks. The whistle of quail sounded from a ridge of brown sumachs. Up the hill, across the deep valley, where wintergreen berries gleamed like drops of blood among the mosses, he passed slowly and on to the beech-crowned ridge.

Here he paused and his searching eyes sought the lower sweep of woodland. A clump of tall poplars gleamed silvery-white against the dark green of the beeches; far down at the end of the sweep the yellow tops of hardy willows stood silhouetted against the undying green of massed cedars and pines. Billy gazed down upon it all and his heart swelled with the deep joy of life, his nerves tingled to the tang of the woodland scents. Something deep, stirring, mysterious, had come to him. He did not know what that something was—it was too vague and incomprehensible for definition just yet.

His arm about the trunk of a tree, he laughed softly, as his eyes, sweeping the checker-board of autumn's glories, rested at last on the grove of coniferous trees. So that was the haunted grove? That dark, silent, spicy bit of isolated loneliness far below was the spot he had so feared! But he feared it no longer. *She* had cured him of that. *She* had said that fear of the supernatural was foolish; and of course *she* was right.

A fat red-squirrel frisked down a tree close beside him and halted, pop-eyed, to gaze upon him. "I tell you," Billy addressed it gravely, "it takes a good woman to steady a man." The statement was not of his own creation. He had heard it somewhere but he had never understood its meaning before. It seemed the fitting thing to say now and there was nobody to say it to except the squirrel.

A blue-jay and a yellow-hammer flashed by him, side by

side, racing for the grubbing-fields of the soft woods below, their blue and yellow bodies marking twin streaks against the hazy light. Blue and yellow, truly the most wonderful colors of all the colorful world, thought Billy. The scene faded and in its place grew up a face with blue, laughing eyes and red, smiling lips, above which gleamed a halo of spun gold. Then the woodland picture swam back before him and the squirrel, which with the characteristic patience of its kind had waited to watch this boy who often threw it a nut-kernel, called after him chidingly as he dipped down into the valley.

Billy was still thinking of the only girl when he topped the farther ridge and descended into the valley where stood the haunted grove. He wondered what she would say when he told her the great news he had to tell her. He thought he knew. She would put her hand on his arm and say: "Billy, I'm glad." Well, he was on his way to hear her say it. As he entered a clump of cedars he saw her. She wore a cloak of crimson; her hat had slipped to her shoulders and her hair glowed softly through the shadowy half lights. She stood beside old man Scroggie's grave, a great bunch of golden-rod in her arms.

Billy called and she turned to him with a smile.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came, Billy," she said. "You can help me decorate uncle's grave."

She dropped the yellow blossoms on the mound and they went out into the sunshine together and gathered more. When they had finished the task they went across to the weedy plot in which stood the tumble-down hut. There, seated side by side beneath a gnarled wild-apple tree, Billy told her all he had to tell her, and heard her say, just as he knew she would say, "Billy, I'm glad."

Then between them fell silence, filled with understand-

ing and contentment and thoughts that ran parallel the same long track through future promise. Billy spoke, at length: "He's goin' to take the school ag'in. An' him an' me are goin' to build that sail-boat we've always wanted—a big broad-beamed, single sticker that'll carry all of us—you, me, teacher, Erie an' anybody wants to come along. Gee! ain't it great?"

The girl nodded. "And what will you name her?" she asked. Into Billy's cheeks the blood sprang as into his heart joy ran riot.

"I aim to call her *Lou*," he said hesitatingly. "That is if you don't mind."

The golden head was bowed and when it was raised to him, he saw a deeper color in the cheeks, a softer glow in the eyes. "Come," she said softly, "we must be getting back."

They crossed the sunflecked grass, hand in hand. As they reached the pine grove the girl pointed away above the trees. "Look," she whispered.

Billy's gaze followed hers. High above the trees a black speck came speeding toward them, a speck which grew quickly into a bird, a big, black bird, who knew, apparently, just where he was going.

"It's Croaker," Billy whispered. "Stand right still, Lou, an' we'll watch an' find out what his game is."

He drew her a little further among the pines and they peered out to see Croaker alight on the broken-backed ridge pole of the log hut.

Here, with many low croaks, he proceeded to search his surroundings with quick, suspicious eyes, straining forward to peer closely at scrub or bush, then cunningly twisting about suddenly as though hoping to take some skulking watcher behind him unawares.

Finally he seemed satisfied that he was alone. His harsh notes became soft guttural cooes. He nodded his big head up and down in grave satisfaction, tip-toeing from one end of the ridge-pole to the other and chuckling softly to himself. Then suddenly, he vanished from sight.

"Where has he gone?" whispered Lou.

"Hush," warned Billy. His heart was pounding.

The watchers stood with eyes glued to the ridge-pole. By and by they saw a black tail-feather obtrude itself from a hole just beneath the roof's gable. A black body followed and Croaker came tiptoeing back along the ridge.

The girl felt her companion's hand tighten spasmodically on hers. She glanced up to find him staring, wide-eyed at the bird.

"Billy!" she whispered, almost forgetting caution in her anxiety. "What is it?"

He pointed a shaking finger at Croaker. "See that shiny thing that old rogue has in his bill, Lou?" he asked.

"What do you 'spose that is?"

"Why, what is it?"

"It's one of the gold pieces your uncle hid away. Come on, now we'll see that Croaker throw a fit."

They stepped out into plain view of the crow, who was muttering to the gold-piece which he now held before his eyes in one black claw. Croaker lowered his head and twisted it from side to side in sheer wonder. He could scarcely believe his eyes. Then as Billy stepped forward and called him by name his black neck-ruff arose in anger and, dropping his prized bit of gold, he poured out such a torrent of abuse upon the boy and girl that Lou put her fingers in her ears to stop the sound.

"He's awful mad," grinned Billy. "He's been keepin' this find to himself fer a long time." At sound of his

master's voice Croaker paused in his harangue and promptly changed his tactics. He swooped down to Billy's shoulder and rubbed the top of his glossy head against the boy's cheek, whispering low and lying terms of endearment.

Lou laughed. "What's he up to now, Billy?"

"He's tryin' to coax me away from his treasure," Billy answered. "Now, jest watch him."

"What you want 'a do, Croaker?" he asked, stroking the bird's neck feathers smooth.

"Kawak!" said Croaker, and jumping to the ground he started away, head twisted backward toward the boy and girl, coaxing sounds pouring from his half open beak.

"No, sir," cried Billy. "You don't fool me ag'in. I'm goin' to climb up there an' see jest how much gold is hid in that hole under the gable."

Croaker watched him reach for a chink in the logs and raise himself toward the treasure house. Then he became silent and sat huddled up, wings drooping discontentedly, his whole aspect one of utter despair.

Lou, bending to caress him, heard Billy give an exclamation, and ran forward. "It's here, Lou," he cried excitedly, "a tin box an' a shot-bag full of gold in a hollered-out log. The bag has been ripped open by Croaker. I'll have to go inside to get the box out."

He dropped to the sward and stepped through an unglazed window into the hut. Nailed to one end was a crude ladder. Billy climbed the ladder and peered closely at the log which held the money. To all appearances it was exactly like its fellows, no door, no latch to be seen. And still, he reasoned, there must be an opening of some kind there. He lit a match and held it close to the log. Then he whistled. What he had mistaken for a pine knot was a small button fixed, as he saw now, in a tiny groove.

He moved the button and a small section of the log fell, spraying him with musty dust.

Another moment and he was outside beside Lou, bag and box in his arms. Croaker was nowhere to be seen; neither was the gold piece which he had dropped in his amazement at sight of Billy and Lou.

"He went back and got it," said the girl, in answer to Billy's look of amazement. "And, Billy, he flew away in an awful grouch."

"Oh, he'll soon get over it," laughed Billy. "We'll find him waitin' fer us farther on."

They crossed the lot and went through the pines to the sunny open. There, on a mossy knoll, Lou spread her cloak, and Billy poured the gold from bag and box upon it.

Lou started to count the money. Billy sat back, watching her. "Yes, sir," he mused, "it certainly takes a good woman to steady a man." For ten glorious minutes he built air castles and dreamed dreams.

"Two thousand nine hundred and forty dollars," Lou announced, and Billy jumped up.

"Whew!" he whistled, "an' all gold, too. The three pieces that Croaker took make the even three thousand."

They placed the money back in the box and bag. Then Billy, picking up the treasure, spoke gently.

"It'll make 'em a grand weddin' gift, Lou."

"Yes," she answered, "a grand wedding gift, Billy."

In silence they passed on through the upland gownned in hazy, golden spray. At the height of land they paused to look down across the sweeping country below them. Then blue eyes sought grey and hand in hand, with a new glad vista of life opening before them, they went on into the valley.

THE END.



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